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Stories of Action Everywhere

Everybody's

July, 1928

A
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of
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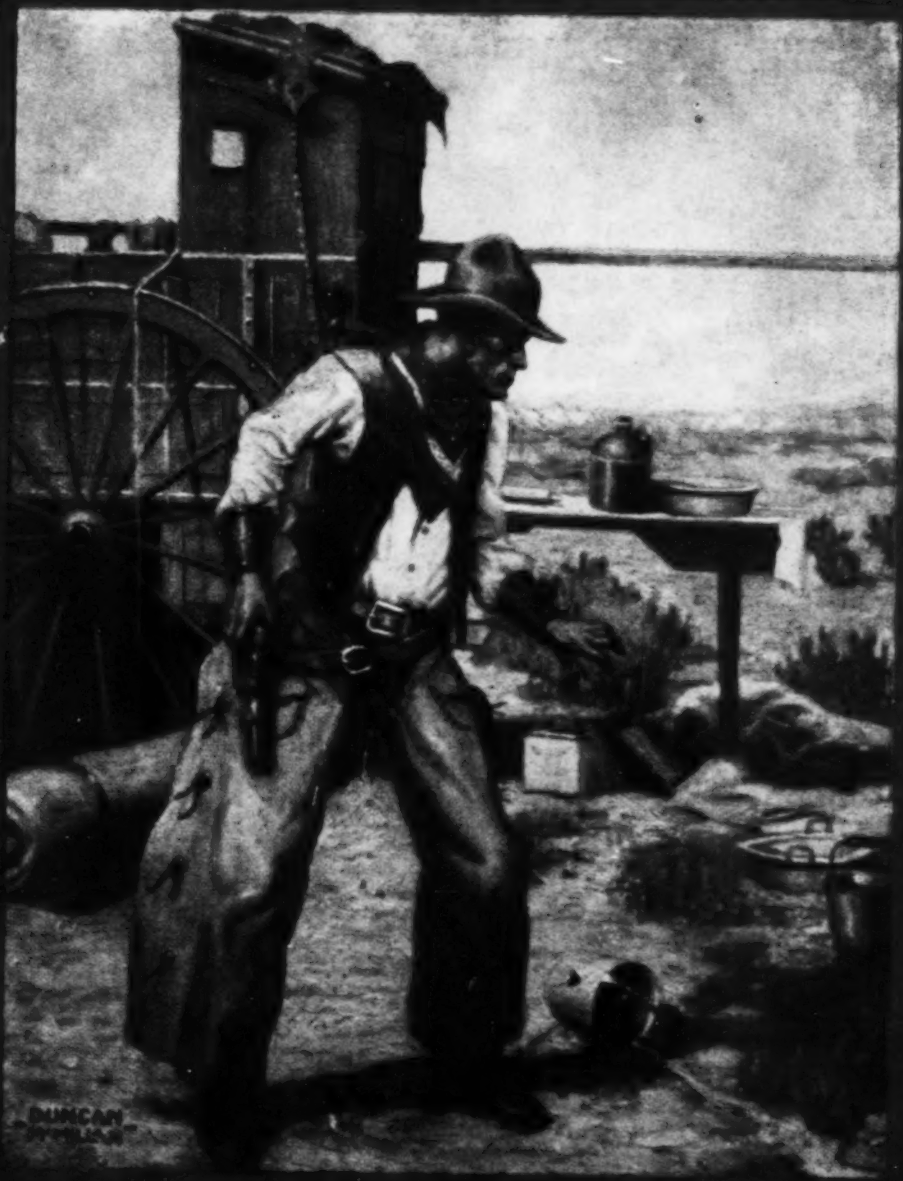

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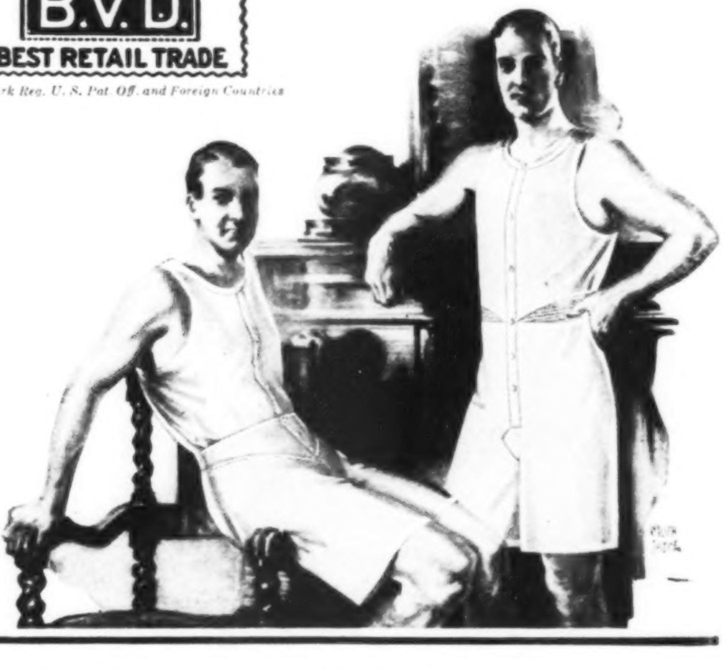

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"Next to Myself I Like 'B.V. D.' Best!"

July, 1928
Vol. LIX No. 1

Everybody's

WILLIAM CORCORAN
Editor

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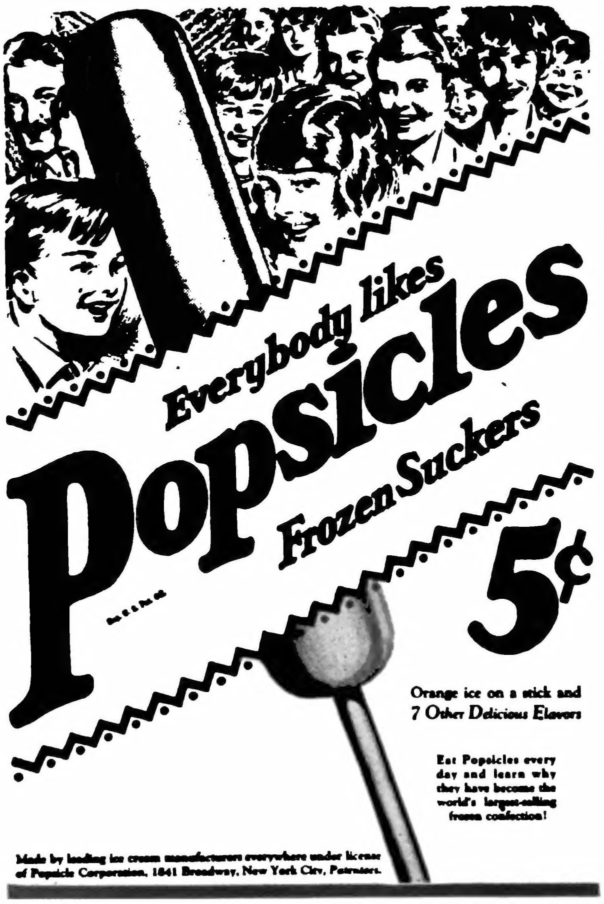
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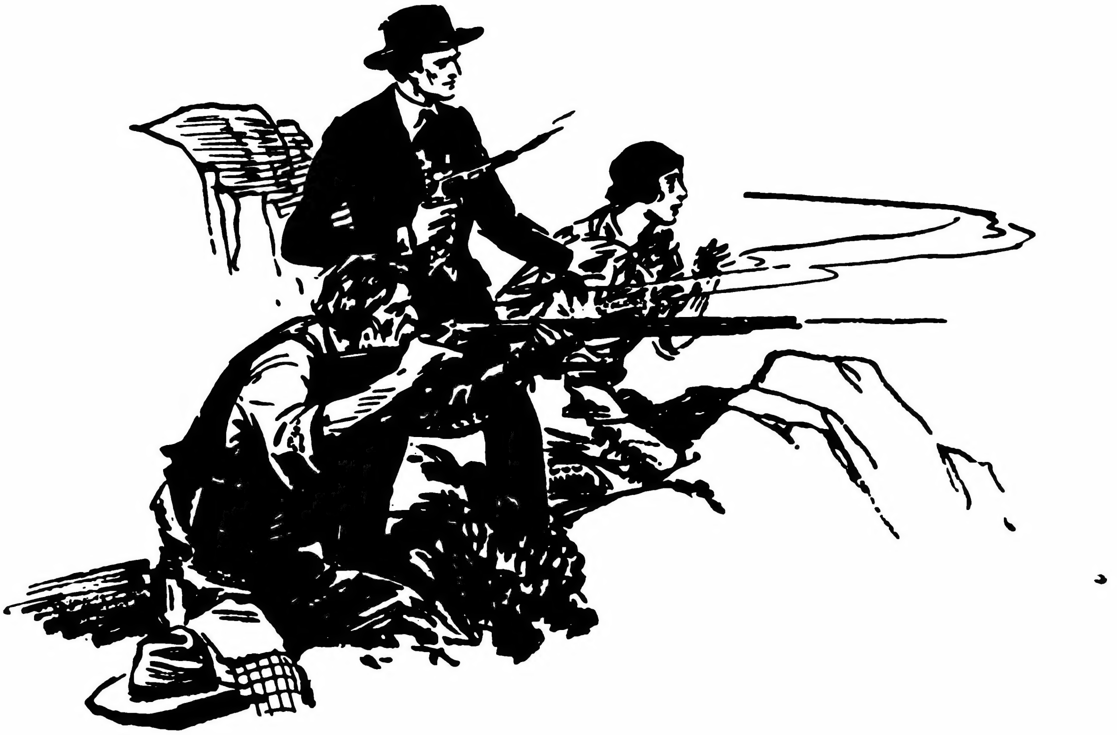

The RETURN *of* RAGGED DICK

By HUGH PENDEXTER

NEARLY all the red raiders who figured in the mystery of Ragged Dick's return have gone to the Land of Many Teepees. They died convinced they had witnessed something *taku wakan*, or big medicine. If there be any survivors they will not talk; no more than they would trespass in a sacred, or mystery place.

Sioux, Cheyenne and Arapaho were making a last play to save some of their game country. Julesburg, filled with wagon trains, was marooned as thoroughly as if on an island. Mail for Denver was going by way of the Isthmus to 'Frisco, and then back east over the mountains. I happened up on the end of the story while leading a hundred fighting men from Denver to open communication with Julesburg so that some of the precious supplies might get through. With old Lemar, a squaw man, I kept some distance ahead of my column, anxious for the return of Toby Jones who had scouted far ahead during the night.

The telegraph poles dropped long shadows across our way as Jones came tearing up the road. His horse was in a lather when he halted and reported gunfire to the east, near midnight. He had not learned the cause as it soon ended. After he had left us to get a fresh mount Lemar reined in and raised a hand for silence. I caught it. Guns were being fired on our right. As the firing grew louder Lemar said someone

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was using .45's against rifles. I could not make this distinction, although the bang, bang, banging rapidly grew nearer. I stood in my stirrups and signaled for my men to come on at a gallop. Lemar touched my arm and pointed. Two dots were bobbing towards us over a golden carpet laid down by the first sunshine. Behind them were smaller dots, but, as we watched, the latter diminished to specks instead of growing larger. It was the end of a story; a very simple story, I assumed. Indians, chasing two fugitives, were scared off by my column. Yet they could have bagged their game before we could have interfered.

Lemar muttered, "One squaw. One man."

For two minutes they remained just dots to me.

The fugitives' horses were making a last effort. This was the wind-up of the mystery which was to be argued and fought over for years. In play-acting they call it the "curtain," meaning the show is finished. For us in the road it was just beginning. The specks vanished in the north. The man and woman were beating their mounts as if Old Spotted Tail himself were at their heels. As there was no danger we waited for them in the road.

"Someone is shooting," muttered old Lemar.

I cupped my ear and listened and caught a faint rumble which may have been shots. This fighting off-stage and the miraculous escape of the fugitives was very puzzling unless we believed the men in Julesburg had taken the offensive.

"The man and the woman have a very strong medicine working for them," whispered Lemar.

I waved my hands and shouted for the fugitives to take it easy, but they continued beating their horses as if the devil was hopping hotfoot at their stirrups. The woman's mount was slumping fast. The man, better mounted, kept behind her. As they drew nearer I saw two arrows sticking into the woman's horse. Old Lemar was the first to recognize them. He cried out:

"It's Denver 'n' a gal!"

Then I recognized him, a camp sport, wild and wayward, but very likeable. I first met him in Colorado City and later in Denver, where I ran a boot store. The girl's nag went down and flung her to the ground. But she was quickly up, unhurt, and running towards us, and screaming, "Ragged Dick saved us! He saved us!" She kept repeating this as she seized my arm with both small hands. Lord, but she was pretty, even with the terror in her eyes!

Denver slid from his saddle and gasped, "The dead can come to life!"

Old Lemar rotated a finger above his head in a *wakan* sign for one whose wits have been touched by the Great Spirit. I believed both the young people were plumb crazy from fear.

I told them:

"Stop this foolishness. You're as safe as kittens back on a Vermont farm . . . Howdy, Denver. You two have had a narrow rub, but you're all right. Who's this little lady?"

"She's Jenny Lee. We're to be married when we find a parson. A narrow rub? A miracle, man! The dead come back! Ragged Dick saved us!"

I knew Ragged Dick, so called because of his ragged, tattered garments picked off from camp dumps. He was a bummer, but because of his gift for handling knife and gun he always was treated politely.

"Poor Dick pegged out in standing off the Indians," I remarked.

"Yes. He was killed at midnight at the dry crossing of Snake Crick, a few miles east of here," shrilly cried the girl.

"The red devils jumped us right after we'd made camp there," panted Denver. "First thing we knew they'd set the dead grass afire. We fought 'em as they came yowling through the smoke. Dick was hit most mortal and yelled for us to ride for it before we were surrounded. Jenny and I bolted. We knew he was done for. They'd got us at that if they hadn't stopped to shoot guns into his dead body and to get his scalp. I saw that."

"And you dodged them in the darkness," I prompted, speaking in a soothing voice. "Near morning they picked you up again."

"They hunted us out of our hiding place in an old buffalo wallow," said the girl.

"And you made for the road and they saw my men, and they quit," I added.

"No, no!" cried Denver. "You folks didn't scare them off."

"It was poor Dick," moaned the girl, her hands to her eyes to hide some cruel sight.

"That's it. Dick!" cried Denver. "They all but had us when old Dick came thundering among them, his ragged coat flapping, his ragged hat pulled down tight. He was mounted on his big sorrel. He began shooting, scoring with every shot. He rode right into them. He was dead and he came back!"

"Oh, it was terrible," sobbed the girl, again clutching my arm. "A dead man fighting!"

The shock had been too much for them. I decided the truth was better than making believe I believed the nonsense. I told the girl:

"It's mighty fine someone happened along to help you, Miss Jenny. But if Dick was killed in the night it wa'n't him."

"But it was! It was!" she hysterically insisted.

"Don't you suppose I know old Dick?" angrily added Denver.

I saw that truth wouldn't serve yet a while.

"All right. We won't argue," I said, now anxious to smooth him down.

One of my men chipped in, saying:

"Reds reckoned they'd rubbed him out, but he managed to climb that ugly old sorrel of his and fetch 'em one more fight. That's what I call spunk. It would be like Dick."

"I tell you I saw him killed," insisted Denver. "Saw him shot through the head and body. I saw him scalped. The dry reeds and grass were afire and made it very light for a bit. Who else wears such clothes? Who else was near to chip in? Who else would jump 'em singlehanded? Who else would the Injuns be afraid of, except a dead man?"

"Oh, it was Dick, all right," I agreed, winking to the men to keep shut. Of course I understood the only thing one could believe. Dick was wounded, but not so bad as the youngsters thought. More'n one man has lost his scalp and lived to show a bald spot. The reds believed they'd rubbed him out and were quick to stampede when he blew in among them.

"It's very *wakan,*" muttered old Lemar.

WELL, my business was to fetch a train of grub through from Julesburg, as flour was threatening to bring its weight in dust. I ordered six men to take the young folks to Denver. They started off, the lovers riding double, and we resumed our errand. Their talk stuck in my mind, however, and there was Ragged Dick to be buried, if he be dead. With twenty men I swung east from the road to visit the creek.

"Something down there," said Lemar as he squinted up at the buzzards coming from all quarters.

"Indians, who were potted in rushing the camp," I said.

Toby Jones, who had galloped ahead, drew his horse back on his haunches and bawled to us:

"Something tarnal queer here, Cap'n."

Reading a story backwards is not a bit satisfactory; for if even half a page be missing you are left up in the air. Our mystery yarn was beginning to unfold, having started at the finish, and it was enough to make a man doubt his senses.

Ragged Dick was there, just as Denver and his sweetheart had said. I quit the saddle and quickly saw he had been dead twelve or more hours. He had been riddled with lead. He had been scalped. But what was an exasperating addition to the mystery was his scalplock close beside his head, and an Indian medicine bag, or some such thingumbob, decorated with beads and silver coins, resting on his chest.

Old Lemar whispered:

"A chief has come here and left the scalp they took away. The chief left the *wakan* bag to please the ghost of the dead man. The chief was very brave, or mighty dam' scared, to come back here. He did it to stop the dead man from chasing him."

"No question but that Dick had pegged out hours before we heard the shootin'," said Toby Jones. "But, Cap'n, his old sorrel has hurts he got a mighty short time ago."

Such talk was maddening, for Jones spoke the truth. Half an eye could see the sorrel hadn't yet recovered from a long, hard run. There were raw wounds on his neck and withers. I couldn't believe Ragged Dick came back to life to save his young friends. Nor could I explain why his scalp had been returned and a *wakan* bag added as gift to his ghost. Nor could I believe the youngsters saw him thundering among the Indians in the sunrise fight. For a long time it was to ride me hard.

To make it more impossible I talked with two Arapahos, after the Indians had been roped into making another peace. One of the men, Big Nose, was a fine man. I had known and liked him since our first meeting in 1860. There was no question about his honesty.

"The big man was killed and scalped at the creek," he said. "It was night. We set the grass on fire. After the sun came up he rode among us, shooting just as we were closing in on the white woman and man. We were afraid. He left us and rode back toward the place where he was killed. His scalp was taken back to him and a medicine bag left with him. We did not have time to make a feast for his ghost as there were many white men in the big wagon road. He has not come to us since. It is bad to talk about a dead man who rides and kills."

I OPENED a store in Helena the year of the Custer Massacre and told the story to a Chicago newspaper man. It was copied by Western papers, and the first thing I knew I was being complimented by the boys on being a monumental liar. They'd keep coming into the store just to nag me. They'd fetch newspapers along as if I hadn't seen any of them. Only one man took a serious interest in the yarn, as printed in the papers—Dude Parsons, gambler, claim speculator and gold buyer. He got in the habit of dropping in when trade was dull. He was good company, the kind one can visit without saying scarcely a word. Not that he wasn't sometimes filled with language, but often we'd sit and smoke and scarcely swap a dozen sentences. One night he took a notion to ask questions, many of them about my early experiences in the West. I asked him if he was getting stuff to put in a book. I was gun shy of the printed word.

He laughed silently, but his eyes never laughed. At times I believed he had the soberest face I'd ever seen.

"I'll write no book," he said, "but you could write a good one. Just put in about the dead man who went riding. It would make a hit as fiction."

"I don't expect anyone to believe that, except old Lemar, who's dead, and the Indians who gave back the scalp, and are now dead."

"You're leaving out the young couple," he cynically reminded.

"They, too, have passed on. Denver died within a year after the marriage. His wife followed him the year I came up here."

He stepped to the window and gently tapped his fingers on the glass and stared out at the faces revealed for a moment as they drifted by through the light of our window lamp.

I continued, saying, "But I wouldn't leave out what I found in the camp."

"No one would believe that," he murmured.

"Of course not. For then they feel obliged to explain it. And it can's be explained."

He faced about and pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"I'd gambled I caught a glimpse of Red Martin passing . . . No; they never would believe that. For we are a superior race. The minute we face something we can't understand we put it aside as never having happened. Reckon you won't write that book. If the man and woman, especially the young woman, were alive to testify . . . No, not even if angels came to earth and told it . . . 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.' "

"Horatio who?" I asked.

"Oh, a friend of a Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. Shakespeare used to know him."

I had known from our first talk that he was a book reader.

"It happened as I have said," I doggedly insisted. "I don't know how it happened. But who rode among the Indians, shooting, and scaring them off just as they were about to muckle onto the young couple? I don't know. Yet someone, something, did do that. What the newspaper man said about the wounds on Dick's old sorrel was true. Some were a dozen hours' old. Some weren't more'n sixty minutes. There was but one fight there at the creek, about midnight and by the light of burning grass. Two Arapaho chiefs told me the big sorrel carried Ragged Dick among them when they were about to capture Denver and the girl. Someone, something, rode the sorrel and returned him to his dead master. His flanks were still quivering from a long, hard run when I entered the camp . . . But what's the use of hashing it over. Just play this as an unbeatable combination: someone, or something, saved Denver and pretty Jenny Lee from a horrible death that morning west of Julesburg."

He started absent-mindedly at the low ceiling and nodded his head.

"I believe it," he said. "Have to believe. For the two escaped when they were almost caught. But did you ever think of a mirage? Now a mirage——"

"Mirage, hell!" I exploded. "Could a

mirage of a man ride the big sorrel? The mirage of a dead man? The sorrel wasn't a mirage. He had fresh wounds. Could a mirage ride among the reds and shoot them off their ponies with the mirages of two .45's? Yet something surely did pot some reds at sunrise and scared them into quitting."

He surrendered, then.

"It's very puzzling. Yet, if we could eliminate every hypothesis, except one, the exception must contain the truth, no matter how insane and absurd it might impress one. The whole affair lacks a beginning. Has just an ending."

I got his meaning even if it was hidden among some tall words.

"The woman as pretty as the newspapers said?" He irrelevantly asked.

"With the sadness and fear out of her face she would be the prettiest thing I ever saw."

"If they had been old people it wouldn't be so tantalizing," he mused.

I couldn't see any rhyme or reason in this. The mystery was there, regardless of the age of Denver and the girl.

"The whole business still bothers me. I don't want to run across any more story endings," I told him.

He rose and paced restlessly to the window and back.

"Life's queer," he muttered. "The newborn ought to inherit the lessons taught by experience. No sense in compelling every generation to start out and learn it all over again. What's the good of experience if you can't profit by it? It's like telling a drunken man, after he's fallen and broken his neck, that it'll be a good lesson to him. Apparently God doesn't keep track of human experiences. Yet there's something almost as strange as finding a dead man back in the saddle to help his friends."

"You're talking bosh, and you know it."

"Not from my point of view. It's just as strange that some men will deliberately keep on living."

He turned briskly to go to his eternal poker game. I wanted to detain him. His queer way of looking at things, a twisted way and touched with bitterness, worried me. But he would not linger. Red Martin, from Butte, and others were waiting for him. The next morning the whole town seemed to be buzzing about how Martin and his pals had been cleaned out.

THAT evening Parsons came in after the rush and talked poetry. I tried to get the details of the poker game, but he would tell nothing. Instead he told me:

"You make a mistake in not reading some good poetry every week. Sort of softens your heart. My friend, your dead rider isn't half as mysterious as the way live people behave. You've been in love?"

"Once. We were both nine. She was a hard-hearted hussy and jilted me. I take it you've been in love."

"Oh, many times."

"Been given the mitten, of course?"

He nodded; then amplified.

"Once. That is, once that counted."

"Cut you to the raw, eh?"

"The average man takes it seriously," he answered. "Hurts his pride even if it doesn't damage his heart. Often makes him sour. The most important man the world has ever known, in your estimation, is yourself."

I scoffed at his philosophy, and derided.

"Me, angry with a woman having sense enough to turn me down? And mad at t'other feller for winning where I couldn't? Bosh!"

"Yet I'll gamble you were seriously cut up over the baby's refusal to be your girl. As a rule the pride is hurt more than the heart. Read some books. I have a trunkful of them. Good poetry to read when you fall in love. Sound philosophy when you are trying to work out of a love spell."

"I have no time for books. But I do read the Bible."

"Keno. So have I. 'The way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea. . . .' "

But I knew my Book. I completed the verse.

" 'And the way of a man with a maid.' "

He stared at the floor as if not hearing me; then jerked up his head and said:

". . . With a maid . . . Of course. And, 'An horse is a vain thing for safety.' So it proved for Ragged Dick."

"Dick's sorrel wasn't a vain nag for strength. He had fighting guts. I kept him until he died of old age."

He was at the window, watching the faces drift by through the shaft of light, and I did not believe he had heard my last remark. I began figuring up the day's sales when, without turning, he broke in:

"What a queer rôle Dick played in life . . . Poe could have much of that ride. In prose, not poetry. A derelict. In the East they'd call him a tramp. Not the type at all to return from the hollow vale and ride daringly under the flag of Mercy. We'd never expect that exertion and daring from a common bummer . . . Gives me a shivery feeling to think of a loyalty so stout that even death can't stop it from rushing out of the eternal shadows to aid a friend. The horse is dead. I wonder if Dick and his phantom steed would materialize and ride again to help a friend, had he a friend still living."

"The average man would return to help a friend if he could," I said, but without much assurance in my voice.

"Not unless the return trip be a pleasant one," he murmured. Wheeling to face me and daintily dusting his hands he added, "Only occasion I ever heard of was in your story. If our ragged ghost could do it, why not others? But others haven't."

This kind of talk got us nowhere, and he always was vastly too clever for me. In his polite way, I felt, he was good-naturedly making game of me. Yet I liked it. It was a relief from the monotony of trade. He ran on:

"Ragged Dick could come back but once, it seems, or the young folks would be immortal."

A queer stick. The queerest for a big game man I ever met.

I had written a friend to find me a good clerk, one who could handle my dressgoods, for I was branching out. I was planning a hurry trip to Virginia City so as to be back when the clerk arrived. Parsons came in back just as I was about to leave. He looked pale and tired.

"Parsons, you look all fagged out," I bluntly told him. "Night life is killing you. Run down to Virginia City with me."

He refused my invitation by a shake of the head; then explained:

"Promised Red Martin I'd visit him in Butte and give him his revenge. I'm tired of myself. Nothing else ails me."

Before I realized it I was putting a new suspicion into words.

"Are you in love?" I asked him.

Instead of smiling cynically, as I had expected, he slowly bowed his head. He disappointed me by saying:

"She is dead. When she passed out of my life I lost all interest in living, except gambling. Well, life's sort of empty, isn't it, when you have absolutely nothing to look ahead to, or to hope for? When you come back from your trip call at my room for some books. Your life, in one way, is as narrow as mine."

Again I urged him to go along with me.

"A much longer journey might do me good," he replied. "I'd find Ragged Dick and have him explain this story which has only an ending."

I suddenly feared he was contemplating the last step during my absence.

"Damnation!" I cried. "You're too sensible to think of that."

"Oh, I've thought of it—quite a bit. But, unfortunately, I am not a quitter. Matter of pride, rather than scruples. I'm sticking to the game till it's ended; but it's mighty tedious at times."

ALL through the journey to Virginia City he was in my thoughts. At times I could see his pale, handsome face, could hear his cynical words. He had no use for life, but believed it a weakness to throw his hand into the discard. I felt strong sympathy for him. Perhaps because I, too, was much alone in the world. A man must keep busy with work to find life liveable. Playing poker isn't work; just a disease.

I was away three days, the best I could do. Yet, when I reached Helena I made direct for Parsons' room. He was not in. The landlady said he had not returned from Butte. On making for the store I took an alley, which led to the back door. Between me and the lighted window, where I had my table, I made out the figure of a man. As I sneaked upon him I discovered the head of a woman, profile to me, bowed over my table, her fingers deftly sorting papers. I almost forgot the loiterer in my chagrin. I hadn't specified sex and my fool friend had sent me a woman. As an outlet for my ire I clamped a heavy hand on the man's shoulder and sharply demanded:

"What you doing out here?"

"My God! They come back!" he groaned. "I'm looking at the heaven I lost."

"Parsons!" I exclaimed. "What means this mad talk? Are you crazy?"

"I think so," he gasped. "What do you see in that window? Is it real?"

"I see my new clerk, sent by a fool friend whom I asked to send a clerk to me. I wanted a man."

He wheeled and literally picked me up and ran with me down the alley. Dropping me on my feet, he panted, "You are the fool! Can't you see she is Jenny Lee? The one Ragged Dick came back to save?"

"Jenny Lee!" I gasped. "They told me she was dead. But how comes it you know her?"

"Know her? God in heaven! I worshipped her. We were to be married. Then came Denver . . . Stole her love. I followed to kill them . . . I was a madman. The Indians got between us during the night. I didn't understand until I heard the fighting and saw the burning grass. I killed my horse, trying to be in at the finish. To make sure she wasn't taken alive. I reached the camp, afoot, just before sunrise. It was very quiet. The storm had passed on. There was the big sorrel, wounded. There was Dick, a tatterdemalion of a man, dead . . . I had staked him many times. He had thrown in with them against me. But a man would have thrown in with Jenny Lee against all the world."

He paused and panted heavily. I was confused to discover he, too, was in near the end of the story. I heard myself babbling, "You know all about it then? You knew how the Indians and the young folks believed Ragged Dick came back——"

"I was Ragged Dick," he harshly broke in. "Dick was dead and scalped. The reds had taken his hair away. Then I heard shots south of the camp. I feared it concerned Jenny Lee. That was when the reds flushed them from the old buffalo wallow. I put on the long ragged coat, and pulled down the old battered hat and jumped on the sorrel. I had followed to kill them . . . I was riding to help them. You know how I was among the Indians almost before they discovered me. They thought me a ghost. Dick's ghost. After it was over I rode to the camp and dressed Dick and left the horse. Two Indians came down and would have found me if they hadn't been so frightened. I saw them return the poor scalp and leave the decorated bag and then gallop away as if Satan was chasing them. I got away before you came.

"Now you've read the story back to the beginning. But it must always remain a mystery. Do you understand?" And he fairly shook me.

The miracle was cleared up. There is always one hypothesis, pointing to truth, if we could but find it.

"What are you going to do now? What's in your mind?" I shouted at him.

"I'm going to my room and pack my belongings."

"Will you promise to keep that damned hollow vale stuff out of your head and wait for me to come?" I begged him.

"Will you promise never to repeat anything which I have told you tonight? If so, I'll wait for you a bit. But I must pull out before daylight."

"I solemnly promise," I told him.

He hurried off and within ten minutes I had renewed my acquaintance with Denver's young widow and had told her all. She went with me to his lodgings.

Only sensible thing I could do, of course. Now when their children come in and hornswoggle me out of candy I laugh at those who maintain a lie is never excusable. A thoroughly honest person is the most uncomfortable critter on earth to get along with for more than a few days.

Another fine story of the Old West, by HUGH PENDEXTER, *will appear in the August issue.*

The GRAY WOLVES

Here is a Story of a Strange, Far Land, Siberia, Where Swift Cossack Squadrons Rode by Night and Crack Yankee Battalions Waited for War

By MALCOLM WHEELER-NICHOLSON

THEY sat, comfortably ensconced, in one of those small abandoned box cars which lined the side tracks of the Trans-Siberian Railway.

"The Good Book says love your enemies," Daniels remarked sententiously.

"Love your enemies! How you goin' to love 'em when you can't even catch up with them!" Duggan was bitterness itself.

Daniels didn't know.

Duggan pointed across the Ussuri River, from which direction even now, the faint echo of the Japanese guns could be heard. For the Japanese forces, like a pack of silent and eager hounds, were harrying the Bolsheviki towards Lake Baikal.

"Yes, sirree, the way them Bolshies skedaddle is painful to behold. Here we been hittin' the grit for weeks on end and ain't seen hair nor hide of a Bolshie. Why don't they stand up like men so's we can get a crack at 'em? That's what I'd like to know." And Duggan's voice was full of grievance.

"We seen a few dead ones," suggested Daniels mildly.

"Yeh, and smelt 'em," added Duggan, and both frowned slightly at the unpleasant memory of that three days' march through the swamps around Spasskoi which the Japanese cavalry had left untidily littered with extremely dead Bolsheviki.

"And these Japs is still busy hoggin' all the gravy," Duggan went on bitterly. "If they'd only let us have a single look in. But do they? They do not. As first class, prime, Number One, ace high hogarinos, the Japs win the embroidered toothbrush holder every time and all the time!"

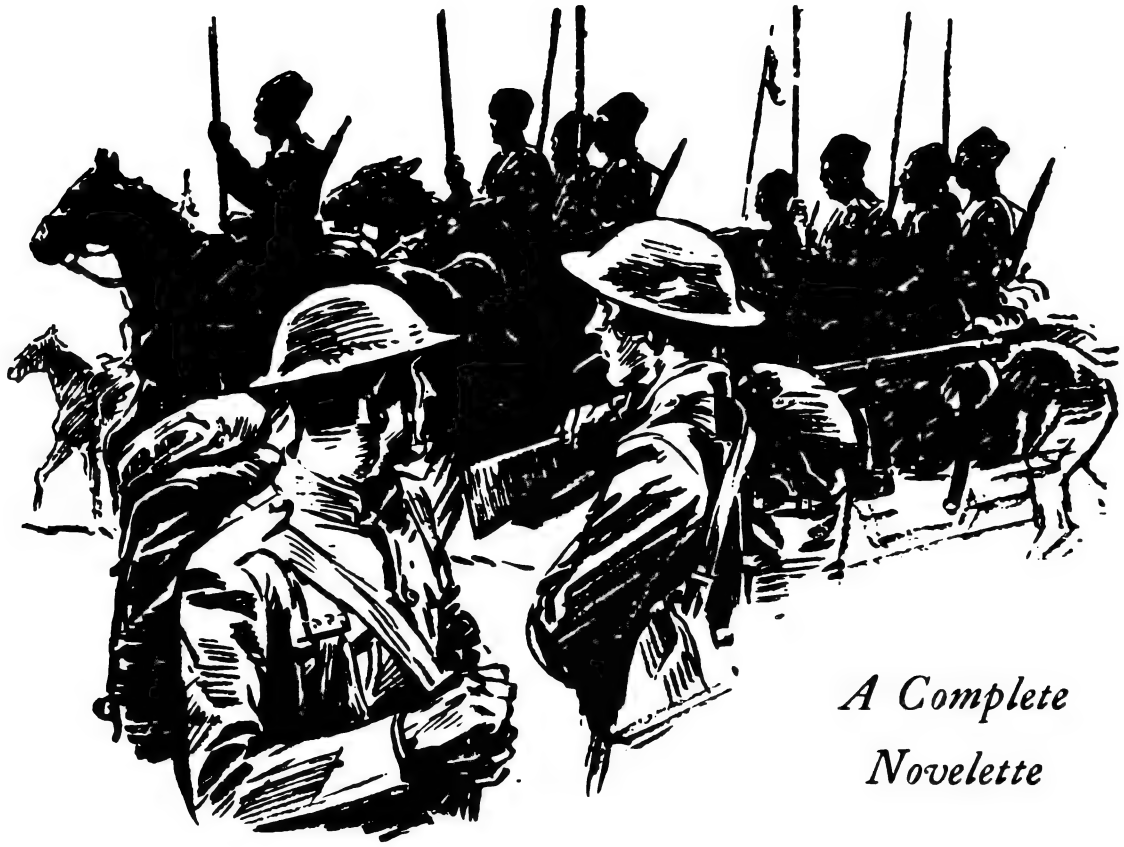
"But how come them Japs is gettin' so blame uppity? Here last week they shot into that outpost of our'n, and last night they turn a machine gun loose on a gang of our men guardin' the railway. Looks like them babies is huntin' trouble."

"They sure as hell have come to the right address *if* it's trouble they're lookin' for."

Daniels looked up at the emphasis Duggan placed on the word "if."

"You don't think they are tryin' to mix it up with us?" he asked hopefully.

"Why should they? We're the biggest allies they got here in Siberia. If you



A Complete Novelette

and me is fightin' together against a bunch o' roughnecks, why should I turn around and slip you a jolt on the jaw? It don't sound reasonable."

"No-o," agreed Daniels, puzzled, "but how come all this rough stuff then with the Japs pickin' on us and us supposed to be pickin' on them? Anyways, they're always hollerin'."

"That, as the cook said when they asked him what was in the hash, is the mystery. But it don't take a terrific amount o' cogitating, reflectin' and otherwise usin' the bean God gives us to figger out that somebody is powerful interested in seein' us and the Japs mix it up."

"Who could that be?" Daniels still looked mystified.

Duggan studied him reflectively.

"Sometimes," he stated with immense deliberation, *"sometimes,* Daniels, you show traces of almost human intelligence, but this ain't one of the times."

"Haw! haw!" laughed Graves mirthlessly, from where he lay stretched out prone on a pile of sacking on the floor of the box car.

Daniels bent a frosty eye on him.

"Look out them back teeth o' your'n don't get theirselves sunburned," he advised solicitously and turned a highly dignified back on the offender.

"O' course," he continued with immense and heavy sarcasm, "it ain't any too easy for a nitwit like me to keep up with a couple o' high-powered intellectual guys, but I'll try to mosey along in my dumb way, I'll try."

"Oh, you ain't so bad," Duggan's voice was placating. "There's times when I see you do some real clever thinkin', and then you gotta remember one guy can't have everything. Nature don't often give brains and beef to the same bohunk. Some people she gives weight above the ears and some below. Beef and brains—that's you and me."

"Yeah?" and he pointed a scornful finger over his shoulder at Graves. "And where does this pimple on the epidermis o' progress come in?" he asked scornfully.

"Oh, him!" Duggan looked puzzled. Graves rolled over, yawned and stretched and sat up.

"Me?" he inquired, his lazy lidded eyes opening widely. Then in his precise English he said, "That is very easy—brains, beef and beauty. Brains that's

Duggan, beef that's Daniels, beauty, that's me," he stated modestly and lighted a cigaret.

An ominous silence greeted this statement.

"'Beauty' you said?" Duggan's voice was pitched in the tone of one who doubted the evidence of his ears.

"Beauty!" Daniels' tone was the disgusted note of one who had stepped into something unsavory.

"Beauty," reiterated Graves, his voice calm.

"Oh, I see, *beauty!*" Duggan nodded to Daniels. "I wasn't quite sure whether I heard you right. That was the very word he used," he remarked to Daniels. Then shaking his head sadly he added, "It all depends what you mean by the word 'beauty.' In the first place, you got more freckles on that mug o' your'n than there is Chinks in China. In the second place, your map looks kinda like a wet dog biscuit after a fat lady had sat on it. I don't doubt," he added as one striving to be utterly fair and just, "that if you was to meet a blind woman in a dark cellar at midnight she might think you was a beauty. But in the broad light of day, not so." He shook his head sadly. "Why boy, you wouldn't be good lookin' if you was gold-plated!"

Graves grinned and said naught. As a matter of fact these strictures were undeserved as Graves possessed more than a usual supply of masculine good looks, somewhat marred, it is true, by a copious supply of freckles and a long scar that extended across his right cheek. But in spite of these small disadvantages the women generally stopped, looked and listened when he appeared in view.

In the silence they heard the low rumble of the Japanese guns on the far horizon.

"There go them damned Japs again!" Duggan's voice was vengeful. "They sure are hoggin' all the gravy."

"Well, they got cavalry and we ain't," condoned Daniels and saw his error too late.

"Cavalry! If what they got is cavalry then I'm a Dutchman!" Duggan's voice was heated. "Why if a cockeyed crowd of cake-eaters from some sassiety squadron in the Milish couldn't clean up on the hull of the Japanese cavalry with one hand tied behind 'em, I'm a ringtoed ornerythadinkus an' I don't mean perhaps! Cavalry! Wish to hell I'd stayed in the cavalry 'stead a scratchin' gravel along with these here splayfooted doughs——"

"I ain't so strong for bein' a human pack horse myself, with callouses on my feet 'stead o' where they rightfully belong, but that don't worry me half as much as this here vegetatin' in this lousy little one horse Cossack town listenin' to somebody else do all the scrappin'. It sure looks like them Japs is afraid to let us do our stuff. Believe me, three days in this burg would make a Christian outa anyone!" said Daniels and looked with none too friendly an eye down the one dusty street of the place with its mud-daubed log cabins.

"I do not think it is so bad," Graves spoke up in his precise English.

Duggan stared at him suddenly, then winked a solemn wink at Daniels.

"Another skirt?" Daniels asked in a bored voice.

"Another skirt," answered Duggan. "God's great gift to women has found hisself a happy home again."

"All I can say, the skirts in these parts ain't very particular," grunted Daniels.

"Beats me," muttered Duggan, his voice tinged with half-grudging admiration, "how this bozo can come into a burg and locate a friendly female in about half the time it takes us to locate a drink." He shook his head in grave puzzlement.

"All I can say is, these here Russian bimbos fall pretty easy," Daniels snorted.

"But you kinda got to hand it to him at that, he's a fast worker," Duggan's tone was gently admiring.

Graves raised his head suspiciously.

"Yeh," Duggan's voice went on, pleasingly reminiscent, "remember that there blonde baby he cottoned up to at the café in Vladivostok?"

Graves began to look apprehensive. Duggan went on.

"Graves seen her across the café and she gives him the come-on. Graves sends her a note datin' her up for the next day. Did she turn up? I'll say she turned up. She turns up with seven kids. She's shy a few teeth but she sure was there with the kids. She's a fast worker herself. Between the time she seen Graves and the time Graves met the kids she'd taught 'em all to say 'poppa' in English——"

"Oh, you go to hell!" Graves got up in disgust and wandered away.

Duggan chuckled. Even Daniels' dour face broke into a grin.

THEY both grew sober. Watching the retreat of Graves they saw him approaching a corner of the village square. At that place there was the flash of a scarlet neckerchief, evidently spotted by Graves long before. Graves and the scarlet neckerchief strolled away together.

"He ain't so dumb," commented Duggan.

" 'Bout as dumb as a fox," grunted Daniels.

"Yep, he's slipped his halter sure enough and is gallopin' over the wild prairie. 'Tain't no use tryin' to hold 'em when they get that-a-way."

"No use at all."

They both shook their heads despondently.

"But that's a mighty clean lookin' little filly he's trottin' around with," Duggan said after a while.

"No! Have you seen her?"

"You're damn tootin'. She could do her mile in nothin' flat or I'm a Dutchman. Her sire is one o' these here fancy dressed Cossack officers."

"Beats me how he gets away with it." Daniels shook his head in great puzzlement.

"He ain't so bad," Duggan's voice was tolerant. "He's a pretty good kid."

"What the hell is he good for?" Daniels showed no enthusiasm.

"Well, for one thing, he'll stick to a pal like grim death to a dead nigger—and another thing, you gotta figger he's a foreigner, and you can't expect too much of a foreigner."

"A foreigner? How come? I thought he was United States!"

"Him? Hell no! Not on your tintype, he ain't. I thought you savvied that! No, sirree, he's some kind a Scowhegian or Bulgarian or Peruvian or somethin' like that."

"He speaks pretty good American," objected Daniels.

"Why shouldn't he? His daddy made him learn it when he was small potatoes and few in a hill. As quick as him and a square meal got connected after he lands in the U. S. A. he starts in to night school——"

"That's why he's so dumb in the daytime——"

"He's an orphan too," Duggan went on, paying no attention. "His daddy and his momma got plugged full o' bullets by the cops of his country and he gets a swipe across the cheek and bleeds like a stuck pig, that's where that scar comes from——"

Both men looked up suddenly. A heavy, low-lying cloud of dust was advancing along the track towards the town. Watching it come nearer, they saw the rise and fall of many disciplined feet beneath it. Above glittered the flash of steel bayonets.

"Jap infantry." Daniels' keener eyes picked them out. "What the hell they doin' here?"

But Duggan made no answer, being engaged in watching the compact, steady column of men advance rythmically, their outlines becoming plainer every moment. In the lead was a heavily built Japanese officer riding one of those immature-looking, coltish stallions affected by the Japanese mounted man. Behind him plodded company after company of stocky, heavy-set little men wearing ill fitting mustard colored uniforms and burdened with heavy, old-fashioned, hair covered knapsacks of the style carried by Napoleon's grenadiers.

Just above the American camp they halted. The companies debouched from the column. Diminutive Japanese officers stood high on their toes and gave commands in high falsetto voices. The companies broke and began to make camp.

"Like young bantam roosters learnin' to crow," commented Duggan, watching the officers. The commander got off his horse.

"It's funny," Duggan ruminated. "Notice the Jap officer dismounting? That guy is supposed to go over right away and call on the Allied K.O. already here, which happens to be our colonel. But does he do it? Not him. He squats on his hunkers and gets a cup o' tea."

"Maybe he don't feel sociable," suggested Daniels.

"Or he's sore, and that ain't so good. First thing you know the Japs and the Americans will be climbin' each other's frames 'stead o' fightin' Bolshies—which last is what they're here for."

"It's what the Japs is here for. What the hell we're here for I dunno."

"Nor nobody else. Looks like Uncle Sam figgered out he ain't got enough enemies so he sends us over here to get in everybody's way and be the innocent bystander that catches every loose wallop flyin' around. 'Fore we get through this mess we're goin' to be in wrong with every son-of-a-gun and his brother this side o' Lake Baikal."

They heard the rattle of hooves on the wooden flooring of the bridge across the Ussuri. Coming across at a canter was a group of horsemen, their blue uniforms flashing with gold in the afternoon sun, their lance points glittering, the red and black pennons snapping in the breeze. As they came nearer, the Americans saw four officers in the lead, young fellows, brave in long, flowing capes, their curved daggers and sabers snapping and glittering with jewels. Jaunty black Astrakan hats were perched on their heads; they wore the soft black Russian boots. The officer in the lead, a broad faced, dark skinned man, looked at the two soldiers and said something to one of his companions.

"Pretty, ain't they?" and Duggan looked wistful as the horsemen rode by. "O' course as cavalry, I dunno how they'd stack up. I don't think they're exactly what the doctor ordered. But as part of a Wild West show they'd sure be there, I'm telling you, boy. Look at them pretty curved sabers. But they carry awful small carbines and believe me they keep 'em in a shockin' state. Positively unsanitary. And it's dollars to doughnuts they don't know what a rear sight is for."

"How'd you like to pack around one o' them pig stickers?" asked Daniels.

"Them lances? I wouldn't want one for a gift. Gimme that old gat with about three loaded magazines of forty-five smokeless and I'll take on any ten lances anywhere."

"Yeh, you sure could make 'em spit sticky with your gat," agreed Daniels.

There was a long silence as the two reflected. The only disturbing sounds were the shouts of some Cossack boys in a near-by field who yelled as they galloped their ponies in a wild game not unlike a game of tag played on horseback. Finally Daniels' voice broke in.

"Look here," his voice was serious, "do you suppose there's a single drink in this blasted hole?"

"Boy, we've found drinks where drinks were never known before. Let's go!" And the two rose, dusting the loose straw of the box car from their breeches and headed earnestly for the village.

As usual, half the population of the place was down at the picket lines, studying the mules belonging to the American regiment of infantry. The Siberians always marveled at the American mules, great Missouri jarheads standing some seventeen hands high. In all truth, they were large enough, even compared to the American horses, but compared with the diminutive Cossack ponies they were simply gigantic.

Duggan and Daniels, continuing on their way, met a toothless old grandfather Cossack near the village square. He saluted them, grinning cheerfully.

"Look here, Santa Claus, where can a couple o' thirsty guys meet up with a drink?" Daniels inquired of him.

The old graybeard smiled amiably enough but shook his head, saying something which sounded like "Na poniomio." His meaning was clear. With all the best intentions in the world he didn't follow them at all.

"All right, old kid," they thanked him and went on.

"He don't get our drift. He don't get us at all, at all." And the two marveled at the backwardness of people who failed to appreciate the inestimable advantages that lay in understanding United States.

Suddenly Duggan clutched Daniels' arm.

"Will you look at that!" he snorted.

The two stared in amazement at the scene that broke on their eyes as they turned the corner.

A very beautiful, dark-haired young girl was crowded against the fence gazing in fright at the tall young Cossack officer, the one who had led the horsemen over the bridge. He stood, legs spread apart, and repeatedly slapped Graves in the face. Two Cossack soldiers held the struggling Graves.

"What the hell!" Duggan went into action, landing in the middle of the group in two jumps. Before the tall Cossack knew what had happened he was flung violently away, so violently that he reeled stumbled and went down. Turning, Duggan clouted the Cossack soldiers. They broke away and fled. The officer rose dizzily on all fours.

"Stay where you are, young fellow," admonished Duggan quietly. "Just what's your idea of gettin' so blame familiar with an American soldier?"

The Cossack started to rise again. Duggan pushed him back calmly but with such menace in his eyes that the Russian decided that it might be wise to remain where he was for the time being.

Graves was white with mingled anger and shame. The long scar down one cheek gleamed scarlet against the pallor of his face.

"What's it all about, kid?" asked Duggan, his voice kindly.

The girl ran up and taking out her handkerchief wiped Graves' face and patted him comfortingly, meanwhile glaring daggers at the prone Cossack. Suddenly she turned on the discomfited officer and hurled some vituperation at him, spitting like an angry wildcat as she spoke.

"Aw, nothing," Graves answered Duggan's question. "The fellow imagines that he is in love with Vera here and thinks she belongs to him—which she does not! He tried to make me stop seeing her. He told me last night that if I turned up here again he'd kill me. So I turned up. But he and his men rushed at me and nearly choked me to death before I could hit him back. Me, I want to kill him! Please let me kill him, Duggan."

"Don't know as I can blame you much." Duggan's voice was calmly judicial. He studied the prone Cossack. "That's no way to act at all, at all," he reproved the man mildly.

The fellow spat and said something in Russian.

"Probably if I savvied what you was sayin' I'd be forced to knock your ugly block off," Duggan continued unperturbed. "You ain't been studyin' anything about etiquette lately or you'd know it ain't polite to smack American soldiers and be fresh to American noncoms. Yeh," he said regretfully, "it looks like I might have to teach you some manners at that. Rise up on your hind legs and lemme see how you stack up." He motioned for the Russian to rise.

The Cossack needed no second bidding. With a single bound he was on his feet. His hand went swiftly to his side and before anyone knew what he was doing his sword was halfway out of its scabbard.

As quickly as the Cossack moved, Duggan moved more swiftly. There was a grunt, followed by the dull sound made by one striking an ox with a pole ax. Without any fuss the Cossack reeled backward and lay sprawled out in the dust of the road.

Duggan blew on his knuckles reflectively.

"Funny thing about these people, they don't seem to savvy about fists," he said regretfully, looking almost hurt at the supineness of the Cossack.

The girl was all pleased admiration. She turned to Duggan breathlessly.

"That was verree, verree nice of you," she stated in a voice compounded of queer musical singsong notes extremely agreeable to the ear of the hearer.

Duggan immediately became covered with embarrassment.

"Aw, that's nothing lady." He waved away any suggestion of gratitude. "Any time that bird tries to get funny, you jest call on me and I'll take great pleasure in scattering him all over the scenery."

The girl looked amiable but slightly puzzled.

She turned to Graves and asked him a rapid question in Russian. That surprising individual answered fluently, smoothly and easily in the same language.

Duggan and Daniels listened in amazement. They looked at each other.

"He savvies their lingo!" Duggan's tone was incredulous.

"What d'ya know about that!" ejaculated Daniels, equally amazed.

But Graves was listening to the girl, not noticing the surprise of his friends.

"*That's* the way he gets 'em." A vast relief was discernible in Daniels' voice.

"That's got a lot to do with it," agreed Duggan.

Graves turned to them at last.

"Vera asks that we all go in with her and have some tea. I said you don't drink tea——"

"And who authorized you to say that!" Duggan's voice was disgusted. "Tell her, sure we'll go in with her and drink all the tea in the place. Shows how little you know. Why, down in the place I come from I was known for miles around for the way I put away tea. It got so's people wouldn't ask me to their houses without first stockin' up with a barrel or two of the stuff. Sure we'll go!"

The Cossack was groaning on the ground. Finally he recovered enough of his wits to pull himself into a sitting position. He felt of his jaw and head in a puzzled sort of way.

"I know jest how you feel," Duggan addressed him impersonally. "You'll feel a little dizzy today and tonight, and a little dumber than usual tomorrow. Tomorrow you'll also have a stiff neck and a sore head. But next day you'll be just as poisonous and pestiferous as ever." Then bowing to the girl with a gesture that would have put Lord Chesterfield to shame. "We are ready to go," he announced, "as soon as the little lady is ready."

And she flashed a smile at them, a smile that won both Duggan and Daniels instantly, so that they would have followed her anywhere, even to Bible class.

IT WAS a small but spotlessly clean and cozy log cabin to which she led them. As she sat behind the gleaming brass samovar, serving them with glasses of steaming tea and tasty slices of black bread and caviar, with fresh butter and cakes, both Duggan and Daniels looked at Graves in something akin to envy. He had certainly found himself a happy home and no mistake!

As they drank the tea she talked to them, her quaintly musical accent making her speech a delight to the hearer. Through various bits of scattered information she let drop, Duggan gathered some facts concerning her. First, that she was the daughter of a Cossack officer; that at present her father was away, commanding one of the *sotnias* of the Ussuri Cossacks under Kalmikoff. It seemed that the mother had been dead for many years and that, with the aid of an old aunt, she kept house for her father.

The young Cossack officer who had assaulted Graves? Oh, he was in love with her for a long time. She shrugged her shoulders indifferently.

Then her face grew more serious.

"You must be careful that he does you no evil," she warned in her musical lilting voice. "He is—how do you say?—very angree and—" she looked about her, lowering her voice as if fearful of being overheard—"he has many friends—verree many. I do not understand him; he does not like my father. His friends are not like the other Cossacks, the friends of my father." She looked puzzled and thoughtful.

Daniels' heavy voice boomed in reassuringly.

"I guess you don't have to worry about that," he informed her comfortingly. "We won't let him hurt you nor us." Daniels suddenly winced as Duggan kicked his ankle under the concealment of the table.

"You say he and his friends don't get along with your father?" Duggan's voice was quite casual. "Has your father many friends among the Cossacks?"

"Quite many," she answered simply.

"So the Ussuri Cossacks are sort of divided into two parties?"

"Yes."

"Do they feel grouchy at each other? Ever fight each other?"

"Very often." She shook her despondently.

"Do the parties ever hold meetings?"

"Sometimes. I don't know which one it is, but they do meet."

"You don't know where they meet?"

"No, up the river somewhere." She pointed in the direction from which the Ussuri flowed.

Daniels had been looking very peevish. He waited for an opportunity to protest against the severity of the kick on his ankle but catching Duggan's eye, suddenly thought better of it.

The entrance of an old woman interrupted the party. She was a withered old beldame, her cheeks looking as lined and wrinkled as the skin of a dried apple. She cast a suspicious glance at the American soldiers and sat in the corner mumbling to herself. The girl grew suddenly constrained and ill at ease.

"Well," Duggan remarked after a long silence, "it's about time we was headin' back. You're sure that long-legged Cossack won't bother you none?"

"Oh, heem!" The gesture she made was contempt itself. Then she laughed. "He will not bother me. If I tell my father, my father will have heem shot—*bang, bang!*— so queeck!"

It did not occur to any of them that her father was a long distance away.

They took their departure, waving cheerfully to her as they turned the corner of the street, the last view they had being the flash of her scarlet neckerchief.

Scarcely had they rounded the corner than Daniels and Duggan turned simultaneously upon Graves.

"Shootin'," averred Duggan, "is a blame sight too good for him."

"Too quick and painless," agreed Daniels.

"It ought to be somethin' long and lingerin'," vouchsafed Duggan.

"Something with boiling oil in it," suggested Daniels.

"Benedict Arnold and Judas Iscariot were gentlemen compared to him," Duggan soliloquized.

"Compared to him they was square-shooters," Daniels' voice was dogmatic in tone.

The three walked on a few paces in silence. Graves, glancing apprehensively at his friends' profiles from time to time.

"Skullduggery of all kinds and conditions I can understand," Duggan announced, "but double-crossin' friends is somethin' I ain't able to contemplate with equineimity."

Graves looked startled. Daniels heaved a sigh.

"No," Duggan continued. "Conduct of such depraved consistency sure fills my soul with foreboding for the future o' the human race."

"Yep," agreed Daniels without batting an eye, "it gives me a pain in the neck too."

"And he's been able to speak this here lingo all the time."

"All the time."

"And never offered to help us out."

"Never an offer."

"And us like to dyin' o' thirst."

"And us damn near dead of thirst."

Graves looked faintly relieved.

"I think I know where we can get a drink," he admitted hopefully.

Duggan and Daniels stopped stock still, examining him gravely.

"You heard him?" asked Duggan.

"I heard him."

"He thinks he knows where he can get us a drink," Duggan repeated. "Question is, can we lower ourselves to takin' a drink with this here moral leper?" Duggan shuddered as with great aversion.

The two considered this gravely.

"He's young," conceded Daniels.

"Yep. Got to take his years into consideration I suppose," Duggan remarked sadly.

"Maybe it'll be a lesson to him." Daniels was more hopeful.

"It might be a chance to pluck a brand from the burning," suggested Duggan.

"Yep. Maybe we'd ought to throw out the lifeline at that," Daniels agreed.

"All right, lead us to it," they both ordered wearily, and followed where the suddenly reanimated Graves led.

It was a small, earth-floored log cabin on the outskirts of the village. Within they found a rough plank table and benches.

Graves went into conference with the proprietor of the place, a totally bald Cossack with a round, greasy, good-humored face.

"*Da, da, da!*" exploded that worthy in a string of Russian affirmatives and waddled away to return with a black bottle and three tin cups. Into these he poured a clear, colorless liquid.

Sniffing of it, Duggan smiled for the first time in an hour.

"It looks like it," he averred, "it smells like it. I wonder if it is?" This last said with poignant wistfulness.

"It is!" agreed the practical Daniels, tossing it off neat.

"How!" saluted Duggan ceremoniously, lifting the cup towards his friends and to the proprietor.

"*Vashi darovia,*" the amiable Russian wished him good health.

Not until these rites were concluded did Duggan touch his lips to the drink.

"When you gargle this here vodka," he admitted after smacking his lips in high satisfaction, "you begin to think these here Russkis ain't so bad after all."

"Not so bad," agreed Daniels. The proprietor was obliging.

"A couple o' more shots o' this and I'll be able to talk the blamed language," admitted Duggan after the fourth or fifth round had been consumed.

"What do you think of my girl?" asked Graves, his eye bright with the vodka.

"*Some* girl," averred Duggan and Daniels, solemnly. They drank silently to the girl.

"You sure do sling this language pretty good," Daniels remarked.

"Why shouldn't I, I was born in Holy Russia." Graves' voice was bitter.

"Are you Russian?" Both men were surprised.

He nodded. "This is the only souvenir I carry from the dear land of my birth." He pointed to the long scar which ran down his right cheek.

"You was tellin' me somethin' about that one time. Tell us the whole story," Duggan asked. Daniels leaned forward in interest. And after the proprietor had been duly importuned, Graves obliged:

THE pine trees, like green-clad battalions of stolid infantry, marched in compact masses up the flanks of the mountain beneath which his village nestled. It was a quiet Russian village, like and yet unlike thousands of others scattered across the twin continents of Europe and Asia. Two rows of log cabins lined a single road, dusty in summer and muddy in winter. At one end the church raised a gilded dome. At the other end was his father's house.

It was his father who noticed with growing worry Andrei's liking for things military.

"I would not advise you, Andrei, my son," he commented, stroking his black beard, "to follow my example and become a schoolmaster. As you know, meatless days come often in this house. But," his kindly gray eyes clouded behind their heavy lenses, "the army is not for men of brains. It is a narrowing life."

His mother, listening, nodded anxiously.

"Your father is right," she said.

"Your father is right!" mimicked Andrei, laughing.

The delicate trace of color that swept upward in his mother's cheeks made her seem very flushed and young.

"Your father is always right," repeated Andrei teasing. "Let me see, little mother, how many years is it that you have been echoing that profound thought?"

As usual she tapped him lightly with the soft palm of her hand, a blow lighter than a caress, and fled from the room, pausing as always for a single, backward, indulgent glance at these two men, husband and son, who so laughingly adored her.

And adoration is a wonderful beauty specific, far better than the stuff bought in jars from chemists, as Avdotia Petrovna could have told anyone, had she thought of it—as she never did.

The two men, Gavril Vassilivich, graying slightly but still vigorous and stocky, and his son Andrei, who had more of his mother's grayhound slimness and litheness, went out to sit in the balmy evening air on the rustic bench which overlooked the garden. The strum and tinkle of a *balalaika* came from down the village street and the vibrant voice of a returned soldier sang the "Song of the Gray Wolves." High and courageously the words of the ancient war song came down the breeze.

"The Russ sharpened their hearts in bravery,
They rose like a cloud of falcons,
They sprang from the Russian lands against the Tartars.
The horses neigh at Moscow, the drums beat at the Kolomna,
The trumpets blare at Serpukov,
The glory resounds over the whole Russian land!
Howl, ye Gray Wolves, howl!"

Andrei's head was upflung as he listened, his chin lifted, his eyes shining. As the last words of the song echoed and died, he turned toward his father and found the kindly gray eyes fixed on him in worry.

"The life of a soldier is a life of vanity, a pursuit of vain things," his father's voice was grave and reflective, "a grasping after illusion, as a puppy might chase after the clouds of whirling snow raised by the wind from the winter landscape."

Andrei shrugged his shoulders, not unkindly.

"Can a river run uphill or the tiger change into an ox? Can a man escape his fate?" he asked simply. "I have read and I have dreamed. It seems to me a high and knightly calling, this profession of arms. When I read and study, it is not philosophy that thrills me, it is the history of battle; it is not the gentle pastoral poet I admire but the singer of war songs. It is not a professor that I can look upon as the ideal man, it is the officer with his boots and spurs and saber at his side."

His father bowed his head.

"Yes," he admitted, "you are young. War has a glamour for youth. . ."

Avdotia Petrovna had returned quietly and sat between them, slipping an arm through each of theirs. The three sat in silence, breathing in the perfume of this spring night. The air was full of the scent of apple blossoms. The voice of the singer came to them again.

"The silken flags strain in the thunder;
Their blazing folds leap forth.
Like sun on the ice glitter the massed coats of mail;

The earth shakes to the hooves of the
horses.
Fly, O ye eagles from the midnight
country,
Blacken the sun with your golden wings!
Howl, ye Gray Wolves, howl!"

There was silence as the last words of the song died down.

The silence was broken by his father's voice, a voice in which there was a note of pain.

"You are young and I am old, old as Ilya of Morum, the old Cossack. O age, old age, like a raven hast thou alighted on my turbulent head! And youth, thou youth, my lovely youth, thou hast flown away like a falcon over the open plain!"

His wife squeezed his arm, shaking her head in gentle negation.

"Yes," continued his father. "War and the shedding of blood is not beautiful. It is not beautiful as this evening is beautiful with we three here together in peace. Better that we seize this beauty and enjoy it rather than argue over vain things. For beauty is but transitory—it is like the scarlet autumn leaf floating down the stream, it flashes and is gone and ever the stream hurries on. . . . Life is like that. . . The past naught but memories of bright leaves, the future a dark oblivion whence the leaves disappear, swallowed up in the gloom."

Andrei felt his mother shiver slightly and put his arm around her. She patted her son's hand as though to reassure him. The voice of the singer rose and fell in some moaning song of sorrow. A chill wind began to blow. They rose silently and went indoors.

SUMMER came and the village road grew white with dust in which the bare feet of the children sank to the ankle. Down this road one day came a squad of dragoons under a lieutenant, who arrogantly demanded the village headman's presence at the roadside.

Andrei, coming in from the field where he was helping, stopped to gaze in fascination at the ten men on their glossy bay horses, their carbines and sabers and jaunty green uniforms. The officer, a round, red-faced young man, especially attracted his attention as the young subaltern haughtily asked some questions of the headman, who answered with many low and exceedingly respectful bows.

That night at supper his father looked preoccupied. The story came out while they ate. The dragoons were searching for some revolutionist who had escaped, although wounded, and was supposed to be in hiding about the countryside somewhere. Warning had been left by the young officer that anyone harboring the escaped one would suffer the utmost rigor of the authorities.

The day following, Andrei's father was setting up some bean poles in the garden when a hoarse voice hailed him from over the paling fence.

"Charity, for the love of Christ, charity!" it cried.

A hollow-eyed, stoop-shouldered man of about fifty, in rags, his face emaciated and pale, leaned on the fence.

"A morsel of bread, for the love of Christ!" the man called.

The schoolmaster ran hurriedly to the house, bringing forth a great loaf of black bread and a pat of fresh butter.

The stranger's hands went out to it and he tore at the bread wolfishly.

There was a sudden shout down the road from the direction of the church. A cloud of dust, from which shone the gleam of metal, came bearing down on them.

The stranger sobbed "Oh, God!" fearfully and ran, doubling on his tracks like a startled rabbit.

The dust cloud swept by the house, half revealing the squad of dragoons. Shouting and laughing they surrounded the emaciated stranger, still clutching his bread.

There was a quick order from the round-faced young officer. The dragoons dismounted. Two of them held the horses. The remainder gathered in a little group, carrying their carbines. The stranger was led out and placed alone, there in the open field.

The schoolmaster watched with horror, suddenly realizing the sinster significance of the scene. He ran up where the officer sat on a mound, smoking a cigaret.

"Are you going to shoot that poor devil without trial?" His voice was excited and breathless.

The officer looked up insolently. He quietly flicked the ash from his cigaret.

"What business is it of yours, my good fellow?" he asked, his voice harsh, his eyes studying the schoolmaster in a sort of hard and hostile curiosity.

"But, my God, that is downright murder!"

The young officer flicked his cigaret again, and turned away without answering.

"Dmitri!" he called.

A soldier stepped up and saluted.

"Get me this fellow's name and address and be quick about it."

"Yes, excellency," answered the soldier and came up to the schoolmaster.

"Your name, quick!" he demanded, roughly.

Stuttering and watching the preparations going on in the field in front of him, the schoolmaster gave his name and pointed out his house.

A volley rang out. The emaciated stranger threw his arms suddenly in the air, then spinning about, fell to the earth shuddering, his hands still clasped convulsively about the loaf of bread. A sergeant put a carbine to the ear of the prone man and fired a last shot to make assurance doubly sure. The officer gave a sharp command. The soldiers mounted their horses. Away whirled the dragoons in a cloud of dust.

"And they took your name?" asked Avdotia Petrovna that night, a vague and nameless dread clutching at her heart. Her eyes looked tragic when her husband nodded.

And it was in this wise that the name of Gavril Vassilivich Grovensky came to be caught up in the cogs and pinions of the mighty Russian bureaucratic machine. His name, tagged with the explanatory note, "schoolmaster of the village of Lutkavka, suspect of radicalism," was filed away at the local bureau of the nearest town, from which it was duly forwarded to the next higher authority where an officer of the dread Okrana, the Imperial Secret Service, itself, studied it before putting it into a new *dossier*. The *dossier* was small. But the desire of all bureaucrats being the same, to wit, to increase small *dossiers* to large ones, it was ranked as an unsatisfactory document by the *tchinovniks* who had the handling of it.

THE harvest was good that fall. The fields were weighted down with their loads of barley and rye. In among the bearded grain sang the starlings. The gray and rose-gold mornings sparkled with dew and the air was like wine. The field turned from green-gold to pure gold. Th hearts of the peasants were like the song of the starlings, gay and cheerful.

But the hearts of the schoolmaster an his wife were as heavy as silver flagons o old wine. For Andrei was eighteen an many things might happen to a youth o eighteen, in the autumn, in Russia. Fo it was the time of the calling of the con scripts to the colors.

They stood, the two of them, watchin a rose and amber sunset. High above them climbed the hills. The last marching bat talions of the fir trees stretched their blea arms against the turquoise sky.

"Do you think they will take him?" she asked fearfully.

"There is a chance that they may no God alone knows," he replied and the tried to comfort her as she wept silentl

It was there that Andrei found them, hi mother looking like some white flower i the gathering dusk.

Of course, he could not understand thei fears. War, to his father and mothe meant that silent body of the emaciate stranger, slipping and shuddering so quietl into the long grass, his dead fingers sti clutching at the bread, the symbol of lif

And to him it meant far other matter Such things as the gleam of breastplat and the glitter of sword blades suddenl freed from the scabbards, the trampling iron-shod hooves and the exultant blarin of trumpets, the shouting of the captai like the baying of hounds at the questin and the surge and thunder and vast mov ment of the squadrons in gallop.

They came to the cottage in silence, bo ing to the holy image in the niche in t corner. Overhead the rooks cawed dolo ously.

It was in the midst of the harvest fest val, when all the grain was safely threshe and stored, that the dragoons returned.

From among the youths of the villa the ten first for duty were picked. Andr and his father watched the short busine concluded, his father with a vast relief i his heart seeing that the list stopped ju before reaching his son's name. He wave cheerfully up to the cottage door where t mother waited in dread and saw her thro up her arms in happiness.

At the far end of the line of awkwa village youths, their hair matted and the yes bleary with too much celebrating of he harvest, stood one pale, gangling youth with long arms and thin legs.

The red-faced young officer looked him ver contemptuously.

"Throw that weak looking dog out," he rdered the sergeant and studied his list.

"Andrei Gavrilivich Grovensky!" he called sharply.

Andrei stepped forward.

"But—wait—it is not his turn," his father's voice rose in anguished protest rom behind him.

The officer, one leg thrown across his saddle, looked over at the schoolmaster ngrily. Then a dawning light of recognition came into his eyes.

"Oh," he remarked bitingly, "here you re again. I suppose you don't believe in letting your son serve the Czar?"

"No, no. I do not want him to leave... He has not his full growth yet . . . He is my only son."

"So!" The officer looked almost pleased. "Trying to interfere with the conscription of the armies of his Imperial Majesty! We'll see about that, my friend, we'll see."

Little time was given for leave-taking. The awkward recruits, Andrei among them, were marched away in some sort of order, midst the gibes of the old soldiers of the scort.

As they turned the village street and ook up the long march to the town, he urned to give a last look at his home.

His father stood, with one arm about his nother. Her head was bowed and her pron covered her face. A gulp came into Andrei's throat. Of a sudden his eyes were nisty. He missed a step and was told to urry up.

Through the wide portals of the barracks f the Nikolaievsk Dragoon Regiment he was marched, under the arrogant double-eaded eagle that was carved above the ntrance, the great, double-headed eagle f the Romanoffs, two-headed so that it can ook both to the East and the West as is Russia's destiny.

Once there, he became a dragoon, a small, lmost infinitesimally tiny cog in the nighty military machine of the Czars.

But the military machine was not the only nechanism engineered by the Czars. There was the ponderous bureaucratic adminisrative system. Among the files of this reat monster was a certain *dossier* marked "Gavril Vassilivitch Grovensky, schoolmaster of the village of Lutkavka."

In due course of time a happy *tchinovnik* was enabled to fatten this disgracefully thin *dossier*. A heavy and portentous report came drifting through and came to rest in this docket. It was signed and sealed and contained many indorsements. In exact and unmistakable official terms its words went on, coldly setting forth the character of the said Gavril Vassilivitch Grovensky, accusing him, amongst other crimes and misdemeanors, of having interfered with the defense of the Empire! There the matter might have rested, serene and dusty, had not another small event started the wheels and pinions to work.

For a new governor came to the province. He had been sent to tighten up the administration of this section of the Empire. A wild-eyed youth in Moscow had leaped upon the carriage of a very fat and pompous old man and had incontinently shot the fat and pompous old man through the heart. The fat and pompous old man was Governor of Moscow. A wave of something akin to hysteria went through all ranks of the governmental forces. The word went out to extirpate revolutionists root and branch. No suspect was too small to be overlooked, no suspect too great to escape.

It was the Senior of the Volost, terribly agitated and hot in his black frock coat, who brought the news to Andrei's father as he left the school that afternoon.

"They will come for me?" said the schoolmaster quietly.

"This evening," wheezed the paunchy official.

"God's will be done," Gavril replied and went to his house.

But Gavril Vassilivitch had won a strong affection in the hearts of the villagers of Lutkavka. The news spread like wildfire. Some of the hotheads had returned to the village a little worse for wear from the vodka of the neighboring town. They brought many bottles with them. The vodka circulated. Men's voices were raised. There was much passionate orattory.

It was for this reason that, when the agent of the Okrana came driving down the one street with a team and only one policeman along as escort, he was met with a volley of stones. One of these stones cut him above the eye and made his face quite bloody looking. The speed with which the agent fled from Lutkavka was remarkable, and caused much laughter among the younger men. Not the older ones, however. They did not laugh. Some of them slipped quietly to the woods.

IN THE meantime young Andrei had taken to his new life enthusiastically. There was so much to learn. The long Russian greeting to high officers had first to be memorized. He was taught to salute in the strained, trembling attitude of the Russian soldier, his hand quivering at his forehead. Saber and carbine were a delight, as were saddle and bridle and forage sack and all the small but essential things that a cavalry trooper carries on his horse. He graduated from the recruit squad very quickly and was put on duty with a section under a hard-faced, rough-voiced, noncommissioned officer, whose heavy hand descended upon him many times in the first few weeks.

His squadron commander was a person he seldom saw, a huge, square-shouldered, black-bearded officer looking very much the cavalryman in his top boots, soft about the ankles, the leather clinging in creases, his saber clanking at his side.

One night Andrei's shoulder was shaken by a rough hand. Still half asleep, he rolled out of his bed and dressed hurriedly by candle light. In the uncertain light of lanterns they saddled the horses. Leaving the warmth of the stables, they lined up in the cold night air, the entire squadron, ready and waiting.

He was thrilled in spite of the chill which shook him. Even the squadron commander was there, an unusual sight at such an hour. And what a temper he was in! He buffeted one of the sergeants halfway across the courtyard. He growled like a bear with a sore foot. At last everything was ready and the command came to mount.

They filed out of the courtyard. Their horses' hooves rattled on the paved streets of the town. Soon the sound became deadened. They were in the open country. No one knew where they were going at this early hour and none seemed to care. That was a matter for the officers.

The first faint light of the false dawn that precedes the true showed them little of their whereabouts. Dogs barked as they passed through a silent village. It was still so dark that Andrei could not see the back of the man who rode in front of him.

At last a whispered word halted them. A dog barked from somewhere ahead. Andrei had the feeling that there were houses around them or near them but it was too dark to see anything. Ahead he heard men dismounting. Another whispered word reached him. He followed. They turned to the right. Again they halted. There was some sort of activity from the men ahead.

He could hear the scrape of leather and the soft thud of boots striking against dust, and an occasional whispered order. Evidently part of the squadron was moving out. His own section remained where it was, standing to horse.

There followed a long silence. Another dog barked near at hand. The barking ceased, the beast yelled with pain and fled whimpering.

Straining his ears there in the darkness it seemed as though he had been waiting for hours. The minutes dragged interminably. One of the soldiers near him yawned. Another one had evidently gone to sleep leaning against his horse, judging by his even breathing. Andrei's nostrils were filled with the scent of horse sweat and the odor of leather. He could hear the creak of the saddles and equipment as the animals stirred in the darkness. The night air was crisp and redolent of fresh earth and the musty scent of forest mold and the manifold odors of cowbyre and pigsty coming from the inhabitated place near them. Behind, in the forest, a bird chirped sleepily. A horse stamped. Another horse whickered.

The silence was split with the crash of a rifle shot near at hand. It was answered by another shot farther away. In the silence that followed Andrei could hear his heart beating. Suddenly, high pitched and anguished, a woman's scream rang out of the darkness. There was a smashing sound as of doors being battered in. Men's voices shouted. There were more screams.

A quick darting tongue of flame licked hungrily out of the blackness and showed the roof of a house. It grew rapidly, side tongues shooting out and joining until there was a broad blanket of fire. The blanket gathered strength to rise high, pillar of fire suddenly lighting up the doomed place. Other tongues of flame leaped up, here, there and beyond, on houses and stables, until the whole scene was as light as day.

Andrei stared at the village before him.

"*Bolshoi moi!*" he groaned suddenly and stood as one paralyzed.

A roaring voice, the voice of the squadron commander, was bellowing forth orders above the crackling of the flames, the yells and the screams and the continued crack of the carbines.

Soldiers were entering houses and issuing forth, dragging out the inhabitants. One big soldier drove his gun butt at the head of an old man as Andrei watched. The old graybeard slumped down screaming. Another vicious, thudding blow and the old man stopped screaming. A group of half-clad women were herded into the darkness by a squad of soldiers, herded brutally with many blows from the clubbed carbines.

THE flames were mounting to the sky. So horrified was Andrei at the scene in the foreground that he forebore to gaze past the church, up the long dusty road bordered by its double rows of log cabins, to the house at the far end of the village—his father's home.

At last his eyes focused fearfully upon this house. It was not on fire as yet. As the flames grew in strength, the light of their burning showed him the door of his father's dwelling, hanging on its hinges. The windows were battered in. Out of it came four or five soldiers dragging someone who stumbled along with them.

Horror stricken, Andrei stepped forward. It was his father they were dragging along.

Dropping his reins, he started to run towards him.

A heavy boot tripped him up, a heavy hand smote him on the side of the head.

"What do you think you are doing breaking ranks? Back in your place!" the harsh voice of the old noncommissioned officer fell on his ears.

His head rang from the blow, his eyes smarted. When he looked again he saw his father more clearly, being herded along with four or five men coming down the road towards him.

An order was shouted at his section. The men around him began to move quickly, turning over the reins of their mounts to the horseholders. They were forming up in front, their carbines at the carry. Another oath and a blow and he was driven into his place in line. He stood there swaying.

A harsh order fell on his ears. With the automatic obedience of continually reiterated training he faced to the right as the other men in the line faced to the right. Another harsh order and he halted. Again came that commanding voice. The men faced to the left again.

There was a shouted command behind him. He reached into his cartridge holder and drew forth ammunition, placing it in the carbine and loading, going through every motion as he had been drilled.

A new voice fell on his ears. Without looking, he knew that it was the squadron commander standing there on the flank of the line.

"Aim!" bellowed the voice of the squadron commander.

Andrei raised his carbine, bringing it halfway to his shoulder.

As he raised it he took his eyes from the ground for the first time. There not fifteen paces away, stood a line of men. Curiously he wondered how Kirila, the old shoemaker, happened to be there, so white and ghastly looking. His carbine was halfway to his shoulder before he saw his father, standing there, directly in front of him, his arms folded, his eyes gazing upon him with something ineffably sad in their depths.

Andrei screamed. Dropping his carbine he flung out his arms blindly, throwing the men to the right and left of him out of balance.

There was the sound of a great, roaring, angry voice in his ears.

In front of him stood the squadron commander, his eyes passionately angry.

"What is the matter with you, dog!" shouted the officer.

Andrei heard his own voice as in a dream.

"My father," he whispered, pointing shakily.

"Your father? Learn now, you spawn of evil, that you have no father except the Czar!"

It was very strange that the blow seemed a long time in coming. He noticed the great, hairy hand of the squadron commander draw back. There was even time to observe the heavy gold ring on the middle finger of the hand, a massive gold ring set with some large green stone. Andrei wondered idly whether the stone were an emerald. The hand smashed down. He turned his head slightly at the last second so that the blow was glancing. He felt a sear of pain down his cheek and a sudden rush of warmth and wetness.

From the rear someone jerked him rudely back and kicked him. His body seemed insensible to pain. Glancing dully along the line he saw the squadron commander standing again in his place on the flank. A woman with disheveled hair, half dressed, stood there, her hands outstretched to the officer. It was his mother, looking very beautiful and slender, very proud and pitiful, pleading with the squadron commander for her husband's life. She was thrown rudely aside.

Another command was roared out. There was the vicious crash of a volley of musketry. Through the shoulders of the men in front of him he saw his father step forward one pace looking very surprised. He saw him clutch at his shoulder, then saw him sink quietly to the ground. It was as though he had stumbled. Andrei had difficulty in keeping from running forward to aid him.

What happened then he did not know. He found himself with a carbine in his hand stubbornly attempting to bash in the head of the squadron commander whom he could not reach for so many people getting in the way. There was a vast confusion of blows and kicks. A lot of people seemed to be trying to kill him all at once. An immense weight fell upon his senses. He was as a man in a dream, unable to move. A dull, thudding blow hit him somewhere. He knew no more.

COMING to, he found himself in darkness, utter and absolute. He was prone on some sort of bed. A sound of movement caught his ear. There was a rustle and squeak and then the rush of a furry body over his chest. Rats. He tried to shrink back and awoke a multitude of pains all over his body. His back seemed to be one raw ache. Evidently, he figured, he had been knouted while unconscious.

Attempting to raise himself, he fell back with the pain and the sudden dizziness it caused.

Closing his eyes in the darkness he felt himself sinking as though through fathomless æons of space. Opening them agai steadied him somewhat.

From somewhere he heard a measure step approaching. It stopped near by. tiny gleam of light showed through som hole, evidently a keyhole.

A key turned in the lock. A shaft light fell on the floor as the door was slowl opened. A short, heavy-set man carrying lantern stood in the doorway. Raising th lantern he felt Andrei's eyes upon him

"Ho, you've waked up at last." Th fellow's voice had an unpleasant nasal whin to it. "It's pretty near time," he continue "They want to hang you in a few hours.

Andrei received this news apatheticall

"What did I do?" he asked weakly.

"You didn't do much," the fellow laughe unpleasantly. "You only tried to murde a noncommissioned officer, and the squa ron commander, and disobeyed a fe orders and the like of that, enough hang you ten times over."

There was a long silence. The jaile scratched himself absently, then leane down, looking at something on the floo A chunk of black bread had been nearl consumed by the rats. An earthen bo in which reposed a greasy scum from th cold soup was beside the bread.

Andrei's brain was working slowly.

"Did they kill everyone in Lutkavka? he asked.

"Most of them."

"What about the women?"

"Oh, they are sending them along Siberia. They can help to populate th country out there."

A quick picture flashed through Andrei mind, the picture of his mother being drive over the convict trail by brutal soldier He saw red for a moment, then opened hi eyes again.

"What time is it now?"

"What do you care what time it is?" th jailer grated unpleasantly. "If you reall want to know, you've got about three hou until daylight when they will come f you to take you out and hang you."

"I see," remarked Andrei.

The whole thing seemed so unnecessar somehow. Here he had been filled wit martial ardor, had striven to be a soldie and a good soldier and they had suddenl killed his father and done, God knew wha to his mother, and now were going to han him! What was the good of it all?

The jailer, grumbling at the waste of ood food, stooped down and retrieved the orsel of bread and the earthen bowl. icking up his lantern, he started for the oor.

Andrei wanted something. He could not ell what. Yes that was it, he was thirsty.

“Could I have a drink of water?” he sked.

The jailer growled something about, What's the use?” and went out grumbling, ocking the door carefully.

Andrei was in complete darkness again.

So they were going to hang him? Rather pathetically, he considered this. It was ot a pleasant way to die, swinging at the nd of a rope, the tortured body turning round and around. He shuddered and ried not to think of it. Three hours left. ot very long. Three hours could pass ery quickly. His poor mother, she would e all alone in the world. The thought of his raised him up. Why, he couldn't ave her alone! He tried to stand on his eet. The first effort was too much for im. Baffled, he sank back on the cot gain, his head ringing. After a few minutes e tried again, there was not much time, e told himself.

This attempt was more successful. It is ard enough to keep one's balance in any ase in the pitch darkness but especially ard with a head that rings like all the nvils in creation.

Somehow he stumbled to the door, feelg along the walls until he found it. It as heavy and it was securely locked. orking along the walls he came at last the window, a small iron-barred affair. very bar was secure in its socket. He ied them all. With his heart sinking he ied the walls. They were made of heavy locks of cut stone, damp and oozy, but tightly placed together that a knife blade uld not have been inserted between them.

His fumbling examination of the place d taken up time. How much he did not ow. On looking out the window he emed to see a faint promise of daylight the sky. His ears strained, he waited for e tramp of feet which should mean the ginning of the end. All was silent.

Something must be done and quickly. ime was flying.

Again he looked out the window. Was ere or was there not a faint paleness in e sky?

It was easier to move about than it had been. Whether this was due to the strain he was under or whether it was due to more completely returned consciousness, he could not figure out. There was a step outside somewhere. It receded in the distance. His heart beat spasmodically.

Probably only the jailer. The jailer? He had not returned with the water yet. Would he bring it?

Turning away from the window he approached his cot again. As he came near it his foot caught itself on a cord, which he had trodden on with one foot and stumbled over with the other. Reaching down he examined it with his fingers. It was a length broken loose from the under part of the bed, one of those rope bottomed affairs. With the length of cord in his hand a sudden idea flashed into his mind.

Glancing fearfully over his shoulder he gazed at the window. There was no doubt about it, dawn was coming. Even now there was a ghostly paleness discernible. He worked with feverish haste.

Dragging several short lengths of the knotted cord from the bed he fastened them together. In his feeling of the wall he had run across an iron ring, set into the stones close to the floor and very near the entrance of the cell. He fastened one end of the knotted cord into this. The other end he fastened to the bed leg. Shoving and pushing, he dragged the bed out towards the center of the floor, bringing the rope where anyone entering would have to step over it or fall over it.

Sitting on the bed he waited, his ears strained for every sound. It was undoubtedly daylight. From outside he could hear a few faint sounds of activity. In the silence the hammering of his own heart seemed like the beating of a drum. A rat scurried across the floor, startling him into a perspiration.

After what seemed an eternity of time he heard footsteps again. Leaning forward, and holding his breath, he tried to discover whether they were the sounds made by one person or by many. They approached the door. Again the light gleamed through the keyhole.

He crouched, waiting there in the darkness. The key was placed in the lock and turned. The door opened. The jailer looked in over his lantern. The man stared at the place where the bed had been and found it empty. He flashed his lantern up over his head and finally saw Andrei sitting on the bed far to the left.

"Oh, there you are!" A great relief was evident in his voice.

He stepped confidently into the cell. Suddenly his foot came into contact with the rope. It made him stumble but he recovered, leaning down to see what had interfered with his stride.

Andrei suddenly leaped on the man and overbore him. The jailer went down with a grunt. The lantern fell to the floor and rolled away smoking noisomely. In falling the jailer struck his head against the side of the door. It weakened him.

Striking and choking him until the jailer went limp in his hands, Andrei bound him very quickly. Picking up the lantern he started out the door. Then he remembered that he was in uniform.

The precious minutes were sliding by, but he returned, listening anxiously towards the corridor, and stripped the man of his blouse and trousers. Then he went out the door, listening carefully.

As he put his head in the hall, a door opened somewhere. A burst of conversation and a tramp of feet suddenly filled the narrow corridor. Turning, in the other direction, Andrei fled along the passageway, hoping against hope that there was another way out.

There was not. Nothing but locked cell doors rewarded his search. The corridor ended in a blank wall with a small barred window set high up in its bleak expanse. Putting out the lantern he crept back.

The tramping feet by now had approached nearly to the door of his former cell. Between the group of men there and the outer door was so small a distance! In a second or two discovery was inevitable. He waited in grim despair.

The men stopped by the cell door, as he could hear from their voices. One evidently entered, as there was a shout.

Andrei crept around the corner of the corridor. The soldiers were crowding into the cell to look at the strange sight. One man only was left outside. He leaned his rifle against the wall and craned to see over the heads of his companions just within the room.

Andrei was on him like a flash. Grasping the rifle he swung it against the man's head. The fellow dropped without a soun Holding the rifle firmly, Andrei ran to t outer door. There was a wagon there, t driver half-asleep. A soldier held seve horses. Andrei struck the man with t rifle butt, felling him, then picking up t reins of the horses, he leaped into the ne est saddle.

It was necessary to lead the horses aw so as to forestall pursuit. As horses wi they threw up their heads and were unwi ing to move out together. Patiently he g them started at a walk. A yell from t corridor behind him made him t impatient; he tried to start them at a gallo Again they refused, throwing their hea and rearing. There was the sound of ru ning feet and a great shouting behind hi He eased the horses gradually until fina they broke into a trot. With a slig increase of speed he soon had them gallo ing. As he went down the road a shot w fired behind him and a bullet whistl overhead.

A sentinel leaped suddenly out of t darkness ahead. Andrei galloped at h with the group of four horses. The fell dodged and fired after him. One of t horses pulled back violently, jerking t reins out of his hands. He went on, throu a great gate and out into the open count with the din of a clamorous bell in ears, ringing madly behind him. . . .

"WHAT did you do with the horse asked Duggan in the silence t followed the finish of Gra story, a silence significant with emoti

"Oh, I sold them to some Gipsies. W the money I made my way to the nea seaport and found an uncle of mine. helped me to get to America," answe Graves.

"Not so dumb," commented Duggan

"Not so dumb," echoed Daniels.

"And did you ever hear from your mot again?" Duggan asked softly.

Graves did not answer for a space, t very quietly, "I found her grave last wee

There was a long silence.

"And what about this squadron c mander guy that gave you that scar ac the face with his green stoned ring?"

Graves shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm afraid he's been killed in revolution. But I hope he is not!"

His face set in harsh lines and

look in his eyes was not pleasant to see.

"How about a lil' drink?" The two looked at Daniels, suddenly noticing that he was about half seas over, Daniels not having allowed the mere telling of a tale to interfere with good vodka.

The proprietor spoke to Graves.

"He says there's another battalion of Japanese marching into the town," translated Graves.

"Serves 'em right," Daniels' voice was stern.

The proprietor spoke again to Graves, going into details, with much waving of hands and lifting of shoulders.

"What's all the *habla* about?" Duggan asked, growing impatient.

Graves turned a very interested face towards him.

"He's telling me about some trouble among the Cossacks. The Ataman Kalmikoff had two officers shot yesterday."

"Open season on Cossack officers, is it? Why did he stop with only two? What was the big idea anyway?" Duggan's voice was eager.

Graves asked more questions of the proprietor. The man explained something at great length.

"He says," Graves turned again to Duggan, "that they were shot for being traitors."

"Traitors to what?"

"To the Allies I guess. They belonged to some kind of a patriotic secret society."

"What's the big idea of this secret society? What are they shooting at?" Duggan was intensely interested.

Graves questioned the man some more.

"He says that they want to drive all the foreigners out of Siberia."

"Are they Bolsheviki?"

Graves shook his head uncertainly.

"Some of them are. They're joining with the Bolsheviki, at any rate, to fight against the foreigners."

Duggan sank back, nodding his head.

"Fine idea," he agreed heartily, "drive all the foreigners out o' Siberia. Here's one foreigner they can drive out without any hard feelings. The quicker they drive this baby back to the land of the free and the home of the shave, the better he'll like it. Nope," he concluded, "they won't hurt my feelin's. Not to speak of, they won't."

But Duggan's thoughts were not as flippant as his words. This news concerning the defection of the Cossack officers, the fact that two Japanese battalions were now encamped near the American regiment, the statements of the girl about some secret understanding among a part of the Cossack forces, all pointed to trouble.

"There's somebody sure as hell tryin' to rough it up between the Americans and the Japs," he said to Graves, "and that ain't a joke. If them babies pick on us there's goin' to be a ruction. They got us outnumbered about ten to one, and believe me, I don' wanta be filled with Jap bullets at my time o' life—not to mention all my friends," said Duggan and sat back reflective.

There was the talk he'd had with Major Davies that morning. Davies was no alarmist but he'd certainly talked turkey. What was it he'd said?

"Trouble is with the Japanese, they are on the fence. Things don't look so wonderful for the Allies on the Western front. It would only need a slight shift of the weight to throw the Japanese on the side of the Germans and that would mess up the war to beat the devil!"

Duggan suddenly went cold inside. Why, the slight shift in weight could be supplied right here, on the banks of the Ussuri River! Supposing somebody started something between the Japs and the American forces here! It only needed a little mixup, some boneheaded fumbling on both sides, to throw the Japs on the side of the Germans! And then hell would be popping.

"Let's go out and beat up a couple o' Japs!" Daniels' voice came dreamily. Duggan looked at him with sudden interest. Daniels was undoubtedly pickled to the gills.

"Oh, no," Duggan spoke soothingly. "Looks like we'd better be moseyin' along 'fore you begin steppin' on your right ear with your left foot. Last time you got yourself a snootful you insisted that you was a horse and wanted to be tied on the picket line. And you was fit to be tied at that," he reminisced.

" 'Pack up your troubles in the old kit bag and smile, smile, smile!' " sang Daniels, beating time on the table top. The proprietor began to look apprehensive.

"They'd be no kit bag big enough to hold all your troubles if you don't come on along outa here."

"Duggan, I can lick the hell out o' you," announced Daniels suddenly.

"Good night! He's drunker'n a boiled owl. Otherwise he never gets them delusions o' grandeur. Come on, Graves, wake up from love's young dream and let's mosey along!"

"I can lick the hell outa you and your whole damned family!" Daniels insisted.

"Sure. You're there like a rubber duck. Any time I need my family disciplined I'll send for you, pronto. That's a promise. Now let's go."

But Daniels had turned his attention to Graves. He was examining him gravely and suspiciously.

"Here's Graves, he grabs all the women. And here's Duggan, he grabs all the fightin'. Where t'hell do I come in, that's what I'd like to know, where t'hell do I come in?" And there were tears in his eyes as he contemplated his unhappy state.

"That's all right, old son," Duggan's voice was soothing, "you grab all the liquor. What more do you want?"

"Thash a fine way to treat a guy. Gravesh grabsh all the women and Duggan grabsh all the fightin'. Why'n't yu lemme have a crack at the Cossack who was tryin' to beat up Gravesh? You're worse'n a yellow Jap, thas what you are. I come up and all the fightin's done and all's left for me ish twiddle my thumbs. I won't twiddle my thumbs, unnershtand, I won't! I won't be no damned thumb twiddler at my time o' life." He rose suddenly from the table, upsetting cups and bottles as he did so. As he lurched towards the door Duggan's voice stopped him.

"Where you goin?" asked Duggan.

"Where'm goin'? Where didja think I'm goin'? I'm goin' to find that ornery Cossack and kill'm."

"Whew!" sighed Duggan. "Guess we'll have to follow along and see that the Marquis o' Queensbury rules ain't ruined in the fracas."

They paid the score with a handful of torn ruble notes and followed after.

Ahead of them Daniels moved gravely and circumspectly, muttering to himself as he marched. His feet led him towards the place they had last seen the Cossack, prone in the dirt near the house of the Russian girl. There was no trace of the man, of course. But they had little time to reflect upon this.

From the small log cabin where they had last seen Vera came a series of screams. A crowd was gathered around the door. Graves gave one look and ran madly to the place, followed by Duggan at a more deliberate pace, with Daniels bringing up the rear, austerely vengeful.

By the time Duggan arrived, Graves was the center of a crowd of townspeople, all of whom were talking at once. Through the open door of the cabin he could see the old aunt, who screamed at intervals and between screams was administered to by several other old women. There was no trace of the girl.

"What's all the shoutin' about?" Duggan wormed his way up to Graves who was very pale.

Continuing to ask questions in Russian, Graves did not hear him. An air of great excitement held the crowd. They expressed it in Russian fashion by all shouting out their opinions and ideas at the top of their voices.

Duggan seized Graves by the arm and shook him in no gentle fashion.

"What's the riot about?" he shouted.

Graves turned on him a pair of tragic eyes.

"She's gone," he answered dully. "That Cossack officer came in here with a gang of his friends and grabbed her away."

The careless air dropped from Duggan as though he had cast off a cloak. His eyes narrowed.

"How long ago?" he barked.

" 'Bout half an hour."

"Which way did they go?"

A question was asked of the nearest and most vociferous old Cossack. This individual waved his arms and started a rapid fire of remark, finally pointing up the river.

"Does he know where they're headed for?" Duggan's voice snapped.

Another question was addressed to the crowd at large. This time the talk ceased immediately. There was an uncomfortable silence.

"These people know but they won't tell, eh?" Duggan asked. "Well, never mind, let's go." And grabbing Graves' arm he pulled him out of the midst of the crowd and hurried him towards the gate. There they found Daniels leaning in mournful cogitation.

"Snap out of it, Dan. Somethin' doin'."

Duggan wasted no words on him but yanked him along.

The three moved as one, under the compelling force of Duggan's dynamic energy. They marched towards camp without pause or falter.

MEANWHILE, there had been going on for some time an officers' meeting in the American camp. Up at the headquarters tent Colonel Bagg had called a solemn conference of officers, all the majors in the regiment, the adjutant and other staff officers.

They had filed in gravely. Colonel Bagg stood very austerely, his slightly knock-kneed, spindly legs, his rather weak eyes watering with the intense gravity with which he regarded the waiting officers before him.

"Gentlemen, be seated," his voice piped up. Obediently they found seats in the several camp chairs. The colonel held a paper in his hands at which he blinked occasionally.

"I have some very important news here." The colonel's voice was rather shrill, and rather querulous at times, especially upon important occasions. "I am in receipt of a letter brought in by messenger from Vladivostok. It contains very serious news."

Major Davies, sitting near the tent entrance, repressed a yawn politely behind his hand and wondered if he could light up a cigaret without being convicted of lese-majesty.

"Very serious news, gentlemen." The colonel made an impressive pause, then lowering his voice he looked fearfully about. "Gentlemen, we are surrounded by spies!"

The assembled field and staff officers gazed at the colonel, gravely digesting this information. Major Davies fished out a cigaret from his pocket and quietly struck a match and lighted it. This important operation concluded, he sat back, listening impassively.

"The whole country behind the Allied forces is honeycombed with spies, with Bolsheviki of the worst description. Warning has been sent to all the Allied commands to look out for them. The Japanese, American, French, British and all other forces cooperating in Siberia are asked to bend all their energies to finding these spies. Information from our Intelligence authorities at Vladivostok states that the Bolsheviki are banded in a secret society. It is called the Wolves, or the Gray Wolves, or something similar. I have called you together, gentlemen, to resolve upon measures to combat this insidious and dangerous state of affairs. I have here formulated a few orders on the subject." The colonel reached to his field desk where he picked up a mass of papers.

Major Davies looked at the huge bundle of paper and a slightly weary look came into his eyes; he sat back farther in his chair and his cigaret drooped despondently.

"The first and most important thing is that there shall be absolutely no contact with the civilian population. You will immediately order your company commanders to see that this is carried out. I have here set out in detail the forming of special provost guards and extra sentinel posts. Any soldier who so much as smiles at a native shall be arrested immediately and tried by court martial. We can take no chances, gentlemen, we can take no chances." The old man waggled his head.

Davies listened to this sadly. Of course, with none of his men being able to speak to the Russians it was going to raise an unconscionable amount of new difficulties in the gathering of his Intelligence reports. Well, he sighed to himself, he'd topped worse hurdles than this one. But Vladivostok expected him to turn in information, and somehow he would have to manage to do it in spite of Colonel Bagg.

The conference lasted a full hour and the assembly finally broke up, each officer leaving with a great sheaf of written orders.

Turner, who commanded the Second Battalion, walked down the company street with Davies.

"Well, old Excess Baggage is off to a flying start with another flood of orders." Turner's voice was glum. "That old fossil can issue more rules and regulations in a week than all the state legislatures could produce in a month. What's it all about anyway?"

"Oh, they've got the cart before the horse as usual. There's a gang of Russians loose somewhere trying to stir up trouble between the Allies. Whether they're paid from Moscow or Berlin I don't know." Davies looked off across the railroad tracks where one Japanese battalion was already in tents and another one was busy making camp. The Japanese soldiers went about their duties stolidly and in very business-like fashion. At the far end of their area was a tethered line of squealing, kicking horses, most of them stallions. Behind these was a line of two-wheeled carts, ranged in order.

"They've got machine guns enough there to shoot us to hell and back again," Davies said pointing at the carts ranged in order.

"Why! Do you think . . .?" Turner's voice was full of surprise.

Davies shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't think anything. I know we can get along with the Japanese if some outsider, interested in getting Japan lined up with the Germans, doesn't rough it up between us."

"But what third party? That gang old Excess Baggage is yodling about?"

"Sure."

"But, but—" Turner grew excited. "The best thing would be to go after that outfit, whoever they are, before they do any real damage!"

"Any damn fool could see that," Davies growled, then looked at the five or six hundred yards of meadow separating the Japanese camp from the American. "It makes you a little scared to think that a few rifle shots fired into these two camps might line up a whole Oriental Empire on the side of the Germans and mean defeat for the Allies on the Western Front!"

"Is it as bad as that?"

"Worse. The big drive against Paris is on. The American forces haven't arrived in France in any strength yet." He shook his head. "The news from France is pretty bad today—and the Japanese haven't got their minds made up as to which side they're going to fight on. It doesn't need much to turn the scale one way or the other."

"But can't old Bagg do anything?"

"That bird! I spent an hour trying to explain to him—and he doesn't know what it's all about yet. He says that he will take due precautions . . . Due precautions, hell!"

"And the Japs?"

"They hiss politely and look suspicious—nothing doing there."

"Why don't you get a gang of men and go after this Wolves outfit?"

Davies smiled ruefully.

"I put that up to the Old Man. 'No,' said he. 'The best military minds agree that it is a mistake to scatter forces.' He wants everybody here under his own wings where he can cluck at them. That's off."

A soldier reported to Turner.

"All right," he nodded, "tell them I'll be right there." Then turning to Davies, he said, "Well, it's up to you to put something over. Wish I could give you a hand . . . I've got to beat it. Good luck!" He was gone, leaving Davies standing morosely by the railroad track.

AS HE stood there, deep in thought, he heard the sound of men's voices lifted in song, coming along the river road. Raising his head, he saw a detachment of Ussuri Cossacks trotting into town, their lances sloping backwards from the arm loops, their hats at a rakish angle, their voices vibrant with melody. The tune was very stirring. They trotted swiftly nearer, the burden of the song in time with the swift beat of their horses' hooves.

"Nightingale, Oh, Nightingale, could you but sing the glory,
Could you but sing the bravery of the warriors of the Russ.
Borne on bronze of the vanguard's shields, swaddled under trumpets,
Sheltered under helmets, fed upon the spear points,
And drinking deeply with the sword blades.
Howl, ye Gray Wolves, howl!"

The words he could not understand but there was no mistaking the martial ring of the song. Idly he watched them as they passed by, a group of ten or twelve led by a tall, heavily built, grayhaired officer whose curved saber glittered with jewels as he rode somberly and silently at their head.

Watching them pass out of sight and hearing, their song dying down in the distance, he remembered that he had seen several detachments of Ussuri Cossacks come riding in during the day and wondered what all this sudden activity of the blue and gold-horsemen portended.

Signs of activity were already observable in the Cossack camp. The battalion commanders were calling their company commanders into conference. The officer of the day was overseeing the posting of new sentry posts. A provost squad was being organized to supervise the relations of the townspeople and the soldiers. Davies watched all this stir and fuss without much enthusiasm.

It was just at this time that Sergeant Duggan and his two friends arrived in camp. Duggan went straight to the lieutenant who commanded his detachment, carefully straightening out his clothing as he did so and setting his hat at the correct angle. His lieutenant, a serious eyed, bespectacled officer, was sitting within his tent.

Duggan strode up, came to a halt, executed a salute with all the precision demanded by Army regulations and second lieutenants. Duggan's eyes were looking straight to the front; he spoke in the ritual form laid down by the heavy blue books on military etiquette so loved in the Regular Army.

"Sir, Sergeant Duggan requests permission to speak to the Lieutenant." He waited the reply.

The shavetail gazed upon him.

"Yes," he nodded in Jove-like fashion.

"Sergeant Duggan requests permission to take three men from the organization on mounted pass."

A worried frown creased the lieutenant's brow. Mounted pass, what was a mounted pass anyway? But the book says, "Never display ignorance before a subordinate." The lieutenant cleared his throat importantly.

"No," he replied.

"Very well, sir," Sergeant Duggan showed not a flicker of emotion. He saluted smartly and about-faced, striding away towards the picket lines near the railroad track.

A calm voice came from somewhere near him.

"What in hell are you looking so peevish about, Duggan?"

The sergeant looked into Major Davies' eyes and a vast relief showed in his face.

"The halfwits told me you was out a camp, Major."

"Somebody lied. Here I am. What's up?"

"I think I'm on the trail of somethin', Major, somethin' I gotta cash in on, pronto."

"Snappy work. What do you want me to do?" Davies flung away his cigaret.

"I wanta beat it out with a couple o' mounted men and chase up something——"

"Beat it. I'll fix it with your troop—I mean company commander. Which way are you going in case I have to haul you out of trouble by the slack of your pants?"

"Up the Ussuri."

Sergeant Duggan saluted and was on his way. He had already put on belt and pistol. Running down to the picket lines he found that Graves had already saddled three horses. Daniels was sobering slightly and Duggan knew that a good sharp trot for a few miles would improve his condition.

The three wasted no time in taking the river road. Dusk was already coming. They had lost many minutes in getting permission to start. In other words, the Cossack and his friends had a good start on them. But Duggan knew that the longer legged American horses would soon catch up with the little Siberian ponies.

"What's it all about, your Majesty?" Daniels was heavily sarcastic.

"We're on our way to grab Graves' girl from a gang o' plug uglies, and maybe get on the trail of somethin' else!"

"Oho," said Daniels, "we're headin' in for some scrappin'!" He nodded, sagely satisfied to ask no more questions.

Graves was white faced and silent, but his eyes had lost that tragic look. There was a new gleam of hope in them. He knew Duggan of yore.

In the velvety dusk they trotted silently along the winding bank of the Ussuri, the only sound discernible being the sighing of the wind in the pines and the cheerful clink and rattle of bit and spur as the horses moved steadily along.

NOT fifteen minutes after they had left camp, Major Davies, watching, saw the same detachment of Cossacks, led by the grayhaired, tall, heavily built Cossack officer with the jeweled saber, move out of town, following the same road. They moved rapidly, plying whip and spur without stint.

Sergeant Duggan and the two with him followed the road as it led up and away from the river, up and over the crest of a hill. From here they could see the last rays of the setting sun. Duggan, true to his scout training, halted to look about him, scanning the country before and behind before moving on.

A mile or so in the rear they could see the town of Ussuri nestling in the bend of the narrow river. The American camp was there, dimmed with the cheerful smoke of cook fires. Stretching past the town was the railroad, its twin steel ribbons crossing over the bridge, with the track of the wagon road winding along beside it.

Suddenly Duggan narrowed his eyes and watched that road. Far down its length, bathed in the rosy glow of the dying sun, he saw the twinkle and glitter of steel moving above a compact body of troops.

Studying this a moment he nodded his head.

"Cossacks," he said briefly and started on again, the other two moving alongside. The track led downhill again, now approaching the river, now leaving it.

Darkness was coming on.

Had Duggan been asked for a detailed statement of his plan at that moment he could have given no reply. "When in doubt, go ahead," was a cavalry principle that he had thoroughly imbibed.

The first faint silveriness of the rising moon threw indigo shadows on their path. As they moved along, the moon rose to greater strength and drenched the woods with pallor, making the going nearly as light as day.

" 'S like the times when we used to hit the trail between Sierra Blanca and Bosque Bonita," remarked Duggan after half an hour's silence.

"Yeh, ain't it?" agreed Daniels. "Only thing missin' is the cactus. 'Member how it used to rise up out o' the moonlit mesa lookin' like whole battalions of men?"

Duggan chuckled.

"I remember your takin' a shot at a cactus one night on the strength of four bottles of beer."

Daniels met this with dignified silence.

Suddenly Duggan drew up, raising a warning hand.

The three stopped. Far ahead of them they heard the faint whinny of a horse. Duggan leaned forward swiftly and caught his horse's nose in his hand. His example was immediately followed by his two companions. Their quickness saved them from any return call from their own animals.

As they listened there in the moonlit woods, Graves suddenly raised his hand in warning and turned his head toward the rear.

Unmistakably clear in the night air they could hear the thud and jingle of mounted men coming towards them.

Turning his horse quickly Duggan led the way into the underbrush where the three dismounted, again holding their horses' noses to keep them from whinnying. The sound of the approaching mounted men became louder.

Suddenly past them on the road, trotted a Cossack officer, the silver chains on his jeweled saber jingling musically. So dark was it that they could barely see him. He was followed by a detachment of Cossacks. They passed swiftly, plying whip and spur, the officer and men looking like grim silhouettes of war there in the alternate lights and shadows of the moonlight. The sound of their progress died down ahead.

The three Americans came out of hiding and remounted their horses. With ears strained for the slightest sound they followed along in rear of the Cossack force. So relatively much faster was the speed of their American horses that they soon came into view of the rearmost soldiers of the Cossack detachment and were forced to rein their mounts down to keep back out of observation.

It was thus that they followed along for three or four miles. The outfit in front of them pressed steadily ahead. A muttered word from the Cossacks would float back now and again to the Americans.

Suddenly Duggan, in the lead, reined his horse in so sharply that Daniels and Graves nearly ran into him. The Cossacks had halted. All was silent ahead. The stillness of the forest was broken by a shout. There was a sudden clash and ring of steel on steel and roars of pain and anger. Above it all came a woman's scream, high pitched and shrill. Graves attempted to push by Duggan, who drove him back with a shake of his head.

The shouting and clang of steel died down as suddenly as it had arisen. Duggan could see a group of horses ahead, held by one or two dismounted men. They were watching something in front of them, eagerly. A low murmur of voices floated up through the forest. Finally the Cossacks ahead mounted their horses and turned over the led horses to their companions. Soon the column in front set in motion again, continuing their progress along the road.

The three moved forward again, this time more cautiously, at a walk. Duggan dismounted and examined the ground.

"They had some scrap here," he whispered. "There's blood on the leaves. And here's a Cossack cap." He held up the black fur headgear. Taking his horse's reins, Duggan went forward, leading them about five hundred yards, halting occasionally to listen. It was eerie there in the silent woods with no sound except the soughing of the wind in the treetops and the occasional complaining voice of some night bird.

"I think I hear voices ahead," Duggan whispered finally after listening intently for a minute.

"I'm goin' to mosey ahead on foot and see what's what," he whispered. "When I hoot like an owl, bring up the horses quiet." He disappeared into the forest track ahead, making no sound.

"I think them babies is somewheres close by," whispered Daniels and listened intently. Not a sound disturbed the gloom in the woods except the faint sighing of the breeze in the trees overhead, sounding like the moaning of a distant surf.

Five minutes they waited. The five minutes stretched into ten. Daniels began to grow restive. Graves' face looked pinched and worried. Then from far ahead they heard a faint *"Whoo-oo-whoot,"* and their hearts lifted.

Following Duggan's orders they went forward slowly and carefully. Suddenly he appeared almost under Daniels' horse.

"Sh-sh!" he warned. "They're four of 'em. They're up ahead by the side of the road. It looks like kind of a outpost. There's a side road branchin' off right about where they're roostin'."

"Let's go in and clean 'em up," suggested Daniels hopefully.

Duggan looked at him in disgust.

"All brawn and no brains as usual. What d'ya want to do, bring the whole pack down on us? Not by a damn sight. Graves here retires modestly into the tall trees with the horses. You and me, we slide through the woods here and circle around and foller up that side road—that is, we do if you don't fall all over yourself and spill the beans. C'mon."

They stole up the road until some fifty yards from the group of Cossacks whose voices they could hear among the trees. Duggan leading, they turned into the woods at the side of the road, setting a rough course that would bring them out somewhere on the smaller road, making their way without any difficulty through the soft evergreen needle carpet and among the big trees.

AFTER ten minutes cautious progress they found themselves on a small road which wound away among the trees, up a hill. After examining the road carefully, Duggan spoke up.

"There's been a bunch o' horses along here not so blamed long ago," he announced. Then listening, he peered back along the way they had come. "And speakin' of horses, doggone if Graves ain't follered us up with our'n!"

Through the trees came Graves, leading the three horses.

"I wanted to be in on it," he whispered, "and I saw I could come along without making any noise."

It was better this way, Duggan had to admit to himself. He had been a cavalryman too long to enjoy being far away from his mount in time of trouble.

Leading the animals, they slowly made their way up the small road, halting often to listen. After about ten minutes' progress they heard the sound of singing up ahead. The music rose and fell, now weakened by the wind, again rising more loudly. It was a chant wierdly barbaric in the steady staccato rise and fall of its monotonous beat, but with something rather savage and exultant about it.

Graves listened, puzzled, as though half-remembering something heard long ago.

Creeping nearer they could see the ruddy glow of a fire showing through the trees and reflected against the darkness overhead. Occasional sparks rose on the night air. The sound of the men's voices became louder. The firelight was blotted out now and then as men passed betwen them and the flames.

Watching and listening, their senses keenly alert, they heard the sound of wheels behind them on the small road. Quickly turning into the shelter of the trees they had scarce time to conceal themselves before a two-wheeled cart came up, one of those long bodied Russian affairs half filled with straw. It was escorted by two Cossacks, riding with carbines on their hips.

Two large bales wrapped in burlap rested on the straw. The cart and its outriders passed by. The road was silent again.

The three found a cleared space off among the trees and tethered the horses carefully. Then, with Duggan still in the lead, they crept up to the edge of the trees where a good view of the proceedings could be had.

Before them was a large cleared space dominated by a long rambling house with broad porches. There was a light in the hallway of the house but the main activities seemed to be on the lawn. Here a great fire was built and around it were disposed some forty or fifty men dressed in a variety of uniforms and civilian costume. All of them were armed. At one side stood a barrel from which various ones dipped drinks. It was evidently a barrel of vodka, judging from the interest shown in it by the crowd.

The coming of the cart into the clearing had been greeted with shouts. The bales which it contained were dumped off on the porch of the house and the cart and horses moved away, somewhere to the rear.

The men around the fire seemed to be from every walk of life. Some were ordinary peasants wearing bast boots, others looked like railroad mechanics and laborers, while still others had the air of being small shopkeepers and artisans. Among them gleamed an occasional Cossack uniform, with the blue of the Ussuri *sotnias* predominating, although Duggan saw others in the flowing, full-skirted, tight-waisted overcoats of the Caucasians, their silver cartridge holders making a brave show across their chests.

Again the song started, its verse taken up by a single tuneful baritone voice with the other voices coming in powerfully on the chorus.

Standing beside Graves, Duggan felt him tremble and turning to look at him, found him listening, his face pale and strained. The song sounded quite wild and free there in the great circle cast by the firelight, with the men's faces now in the shadows and now in the light. Some four or five *balalaikas* zoomed forth a throbbing accompaniment. The voice of the singer came high and clear, shaken with fervor. The music of the *balalaikas* drifted along behind him, pulsing the melody.

"From the banks of the Don rolls the sound of thunder,
From Dnieper's waters rings the roar of battle.
The ravens rise on fearful wings, black against the sky,
The bells are tolled in the veyeche *of Novgorod the Great,*
Blood flows in great floods on the Nepryadva,
The pagan Tartars march against the Holy Russian Land.
Howl, ye Gray Wolves, howl!"

The last words crashed out with the full voiced energy of all the men about the fire. As the echoes died away in the woods there was silence. In the stillness, Duggan heard a groan beside him and found Graves, his head bent in his arm, shaking with a dry sob.

"Sounds like a comic opera," whispered Daniels hoarsely from the other side.

"Won't be so doggone comic if them babies gets a sniff of us," warned Duggan, watching Graves with a puzzled frown.

Of the girl, Vera, there was no sign. Searching, keen eyed, Duggan finally spotted a shadow prone on the porch of the house. Before the shadow stood a sentinel with his carbine on his shoulder. The shadow moved and stirred and rose to a sitting position. Someone threw a fresh log on the fire. In the increased light shed by the shower of sparks and the quick mounting flame Duggan recognized the shadow and nudged his companions.

"It's the young Cossack officer we hammered today," he whispered and Graves forgot the emotions roused by the song in the anger stirred up by the sight of his enemy.

There was a sudden commotion about the fire. The door of the house swung open. A thin, stoop shouldered officer came out. The gilt lace on collar and cuffs proclaimed him a Guard's officer, the dark green blouse faced with yellow and the dark blue breeches and black soft leather boots showed him to have been an officer of the crack Preobajenski Guard, that famous regiment of the Imperial Body Guard. He was followed by two Cossack officers, their silver spur and saber chains jingling musically, their long capes flung carelessly over their shoulders.

The Americans watched breathlessly as the three officers came onto the porch and stood above the assemblage. The Preobajenski Guard's officer started to speak, What he was about to say they never learned.

For at that moment shouting and trampling broke out in the rear of the three Americans hiding at the edge of the clearing. The men about the fire sprang to their feet and looked toward their hiding place. Suddenly the woods swarmed with men. A huge Russian swung at Duggan with a clubbed carbine. Duggan dodged and closed with the man, bringing him to the ground. In his fall Duggan fell with him. A knot of men threw themselves on him. Daniels went down with a swing from a club after smashing at every face he could reach. Graves was overpowered as he struggled with a peasant. The three were bound and dragged forth from their hiding into the clearing.

The officers on the porch looked them over impassively, then pointed to the porch. The three were flung down beside the young Cossack officer.

Breathless and half stunned, Duggan managed to raise his head to see what was going on. The Guard's officer had called two or three men who were busy undoing the bales carried there in the two-wheeled cart. A sharp order was barked. The men around the campfire lined up in some sort of order. The three officers went amongst them picking out various ones. The groups were at last divided into two nearly equal detachments of some twenty-five men each.

THE first bale had been opened by now. Duggan noticed that one of the two groups was composed of the shorter men in the detachment.

Hearing low voiced conversation on his left, he looked over and saw that Graves was talking with the young Cossack officer who rested bound on the porch behind him. Looking back to the main scene, he saw that the bale had been dragged from the porch and that some sort of a uniform was being issued to the group composed of the smaller men. They began to laugh and joke and dress in the clothing provided them. To save himself, Duggan could not figure out what it was all about.. For as the men rapidly got into the new uniforms he saw that cut and color of them strangely resembled the uniform of the Japanese soldier, even to the untidy looking, flattened cloth cap. Pondering on the strangeness of this, he watched while the other bale was opened.

These uniforms were not the mustard colored Japanese type; they were the familiar olive drab that he had seen all his life. A dim inkling of what it portended came to him. He swore softly to himself, incredulous. The taller men began to get into their uniforms. As one after another completed his changing Duggan's eyes grew round with astonishment. For there before him began to appear American doughboys complete even to puttees and campaign hats.

A slowly awakening realization of what this meant made him struggle with his bonds. Thank God, they had been hurriedly and carelessly tied! But the sentinel stood there above them, his carbine ready to stop any attempts at escape.

The full meaning of the whole terrible business came to him as he lay there helpless. Of course, it was clear as daylight itself. These Russians were going to appear somewhere between the American and the Japanese camps. The pseudo-Americans were to fire into the Japanese camp taking care to be seen. The fake Japanese soldiers were to fire into the American camp, taking equal care that their uniforms were noted. Then when both sides were hotly engaged, the disguised Russians would withdraw quietly and let the two Allies fight it out! Cold beads of sweat came to his forehead as he realized all the implications of the scheme. It would lead to a great slaughter on both sides, a slaughter in which the American soldiers would suffer terribly, through their shortage of machine guns. Worse than that, it might be the final weight that would tip Japan over to the side of the Central Empires in the World War!

The sentinel, as though subtly aware of his captive's mental turmoil, came closer so that the man stood above him and it was impossible to move without being detected.

The two groups of men on the lawn began to form up, their rifles on their shoulders. From where he was, Duggan groaned at the devilish likeness they bore to the respective Allies whom they had copied. The group of larger men looked very much as a group of doughboys might look at a distance and the Japanese contingent could easily be mistaken for veritable Nipponese warriors. In the confusion and excitement of early dawn, Duggan knew too well that both Americans and Japanese would firmly believe that they were being attacked by their erstwhile allies.

What infernal brain could have devised such a scheme! Duggan swore aloud so that the sentinel looked at him puzzled. The young Cossack officer and Graves were still talking in low voiced serious tones. A shouted order brought Duggan's attention back to the formation on the lawn. The contingent which was clad in American uniforms was being formed up in column. They moved out, to be followed in turn by the pseudo-Japanese.

The lawn was soon cleared of the crowd of men. Two Cossacks were left behind and sat by the fire, cup in hand, enjoying the remainder of the vodka left in the barrel. From the house behind Duggan there came no sound. The sentinel watched his companions wistfully, as they sat in comfort drinking away without a care in the world to all seeming. He gazed down unfavorably on his prisoners. Duggan, watching him, was aware of the struggle going on in his mind, and grinned to himself. Finally the fellow, after looking carefully over each of the four men bound on the porch, carried himself and his carbine down to his companions near the fire. Quickly filling a tin cup from the barrel, he sat down evidently satisfying his conscience by taking a position where he could watch the prisoners.

"Dan!" whispered Duggan.

"Yeh?" a sour voice answered him.

"We gotta get the hell outa here and get outa here quick!"

"Try *that* on your piano, bright boy." Daniels' voice was scornful.

Grunting and squirming, Duggan worked at the cord which bound his hands behind him. So hard did he work that his wrists began to be chafed from the force he exerted. After five minutes of straining he sighed happily.

"Dan, you big hunk o' mud!"

"Yeh? What's on your mind now?" came Daniels' weary voice.

"I got my hands undid. Wiggle yourself this way and I'll try to untie you." And Duggan, watching the group at the fire very carefully, shoved himself along the floor of the porch, inch by inch, gradually nearing Daniels who also shortened the distance between them.

Working with frantic haste, thinking of those two grim detachments marching steadily towards the American camp, Duggan untied Daniels' bonds.

"Snappy work, kid," approved Daniels, flexing his stiff wrists. "What's next on the program?"

"Undo Graves' ropes and try not to flounder around like an elephant in a swamp doin' it," whispered Duggan.

THE men at the fire began to sing, their arms around each other's shoulders. The vodka was evidently working. Duggan took his attention from them a moment and watched the cautious movements of Daniels, who was working at Graves' cords.

Suddenly a sibilant whisper from Duggan came to their ears.

"Cheese it!"

For the sentinel, remembering his duties, had risen and was slowly making his way towards them, his carbine at the trail. The prisoners froze into immobility.

Walking up the steps, the man approached Duggan and leaned over the better to see him.

"Sweet poppa!" sighed Duggan and shot both arms up grasping the fellow by the throat, at the same time swinging his legs around and kicking the sentinel's feet from under him. The Cossack fell across him, unable to make a sound due to the grip around his throat. His carbine dropped to the floor with a crash.

The men at the fire looked up at the sound.

"Take care of this guy, Dan!" Duggan panted and flung him into Daniels' waiting arms. Grasping the carbine Duggan rose, leaped down the steps and ran swiftly to the men at the fire.

One of them shouted and reached for his rifle. But Duggan lunged forward with the clubbed carbine and dropped him before ever his hand touched it.

The second man, startled out of his senses, had stared stupidly. Suddenly recovering his wits, he flung himself at Duggan, a knife in his hand. Duggan chopped down at the hand holding the knife, sending the blade twisting and spinning through the air, and losing his temper completely, let drive with the full weight of his body behind his fist, catching the soldier a slanting blow across the point of the jaw. So powerful was the impetus he had put behind the blow that the man staggered backwards and his head fell, resting in the fire.

Seeing that he was likely to burn to death, Duggan hauled him out by one leg and dropped him out of danger.

On the porch things seemed to have worked out well; the sentinel lay bound in his turn, Daniels was on his feet aiding Graves. Duggan ran up.

"How about this guy?" asked Duggan pointing to the young Cossack officer who still lay bound.

"He is a good fellow," Graves responded most surprisingly. "He must come also."

" 'S all right with me," Duggan was laconic, "only we gotta get outa here quicker'n scat. There's goin' to be hell poppin' between our outfit and the Japs unless we can drag bottom out o' here pretty pronto!"

The young Cossack officer was soon unbound and rose, thanking them gravely.

"Horses, horses, I'd give my eyeteeth for a oat hound!" Duggan looked around.

"They're behind here somewheres." Daniels headed around the corner of the house followed by the rest of the party.

A great gleam of new hope filled Duggan when he saw, not only their own three American horses tied in a shed behind the house but several Cossack ponies as well.

The saddles and bridles were on their animals. Quickly adjusting girths and blankets, they led the mounts out.

"Jest a minute," Duggan halted them. "We ain't got even a jack-knife between us an' we might get mixed up in a scrap on the way back." For the Russians had relieved them of their automatics when they were captured.

Duggan found a curved Cossack saber slung to the saddle of one of the ponies. Daniels equipped himself with a carbine from one of the unconscious men near the fire. Graves picked up a saber somewhere as did the young Cossack officer.

"What about this guy?" Duggan whispered to Graves as they mounted, pointing to the Cossack.

"I'll explain later. He's all right," returned Graves and they wasted no further time but headed down the small road, Duggan in the lead, watching every turn of the road carefully, his bare saber in his hand.

Feeling of the blade and the hilt he cut once or twice at branches and leaves on his path and sighed with the satisfaction of holding a good weapon in his hand. The saber balanced sweetly in his grasp, with that little quiver of resiliency possessed by good steel.

It was well that he carried it ready for action. For as they rounded a turn in the small road he saw a black hulk ahead which, as he galloped nearer, swiftly resolved itself into a group of mounted Cossacks.

With a shout he put spurs to his horse, and drove at them, his saber at the charge. A long lance reached out of the gloom and fumbled for him. He bent his body to the right and avoided it, following down the shaft with his blade until the point struck home and he felt the impact of steel on flesh and bone. A scream came out of the darkness. Disengaging his point as he went past, he struck savagely with the edge at a dark blot on his right and felt someone give before him. There was the sharp crack of a carbine and a bullet whistled past his ear. A shadow loomed closely on his left. He had not time to draw back his blade for a cut or a thrust but smashed viciously with the hilt on a wavering blur that looked like a face. Behind him he heard Daniels' deep voice baying like a happy hound and suddenly he was coursing down the road with the pound of hooves behind him.

Reining in he called, "Dan? Graves?" and received an answering shout.

"Everybody here?" he asked.

"O. K.," Daniels' voice came from beside him. They bent low in the saddles and gave their horses the reins. The willing beasts, headed for their own camp and stablemates, stretched out joyously. The dim white road flowed beneath their feet, the dark trees flashed by, up hill they dashed and swept down into the hollows, surging around the road turns and sweeping along the level stretches as though flying, the steady beat and tattoo of the hooves thudding strongly and truly and beating a refrain to Duggan's thoughts as he gave easily to the tireless motion.

The fake American and Japanese detachments had a good start. He figured they must be halfway there by now. A worry as to how he was going to pass by them and arrive at camp first began to stir in his mind. Get by them he must and with no waste of time. Even after he arrived in camp it would take some time to make the military mind grasp what it was all about and moved to the point of taking precautions.

If only the rear guard of mounted Cossacks they had overborne a few minutes back had not fired those shots. He was afraid that the sound of rifle shots would alarm the commander of the detachment and lead him to guard the road in his rear. In that case it meant charging through rifle fire which was not so good. From the time they had spent at the gallop he estimated that they by now had covered nearly half the distance.

It was nearly time to slow up before running into something too big to bite off in one gulp. Waving to his companions, he reined in, just as they approached a turn in the road. The horses were breathing hard from their long run, their flanks heaving and their jaws foam flecked.

Crowding his mount against the trees at the side of the road, Duggan pushed up to where he could gaze around the corner. Pulling his horse back quickly, he signaled his companions to be silent. Quietly drawing them with him a few yards to the rear, he halted.

"They got a tree dragged across the road and there's eight or ten men sitting there with their rifles poked over the top waitin' for us!" he whispered, frowning with worry.

FAR ahead, the long column of dismounted men, half of them dressed as American soldiers and the other half as Japanese, marched along silently and steadily towards their objective, the two Allied camps that lay so quiet and unsuspecting in the meadowlands on the bank of the Ussuri River. Each of the camps was well guarded by the usual line of sentry posts. What was not guarded was the dangerous strip of five hundred yards that separated the two forces. It was toward this strip of unprotected territory that the Russians marched so surely.

In the American camp all was dark except here and there where a banked fire glowed in the darkness. In the guard tent a candle shed a dim radiance. The officer of the day had made his first after-midnight inspection and was returning to throw himself on his cot for a few minutes when a shadow loomed out of the dusk. Peering at it, he saluted.

"Don't you ever sleep, Major?" he asked.

"Kind of restless tonight," Davies' voice came out of the dark. "I let two or three of my men go out on mounted pass and they're not back yet."

"Probably grabbed off more vodka than they could absorb." The officer of the day was cynical.

"I wish I could think so," returned Davies, gloomily, to the surprise of the captain. "One of them is Sergeant Duggan, and if there is one soldier in this man's army that can handle his liquor it's that same Sergeant Duggan. No, I'm afraid they're in trouble somewhere." And he stared into the night towards that river road up which he had last seen the dust of Sergeant Duggan's departure.

Could he have seen through the darkness of the night he would have been able to descry at that moment a long column of men pouring steadily and silently over the crest of a hill some two miles away. But the darkness kept its secrets and Davies turned back to his own tent where he lighted his folding lantern and tried to read a two months' old magazine which he had wheedled out of a Y. M. C. A. secretary.

The town of Ussuri was dark with the exception of the house occupied by Vera and her old aunt. Tonight this house was lighted up. A long table was set with food and vodka and the place was thronged with Cossacks doing honor to a tall, grayhaired, heavily built Cossack officer, her father, who sat at the head of the board, his daughter by his side, and answered many congratulations on his rescue of her from her abductors. The old aunt busied herself in the kitchen where she scolded and fussed with two or three extra women brought in to aid on this auspicious occasion. There was to be feasting and rejoicing in this house tonight.

BUT there was no rejoicing far back on the river road where Sergeant Duggan talked in low voiced earnestness with Graves.

"He'll be along in a minute. He's riding a Cossack pony," answered Graves and they waited with what patience they could for the Cossack officer.

After several minutes they heard the thudding of his horse's hooves in the soft road and in another minute he was amongst them and had drawn rein.

"Do you know any way we can get

around this barricade, through the woods?" Duggan asked him.

The Cossack nodded and moved out through the trees at the side of the road. Here the underbrush was thick, but after a few minutes of hard going they came out into the heavy timber where the way was smoother. The Cossack led them nearly half a mile before turning back to the road again. Entering the road at the foot of a hill they rode to the top, listening and watching for sign of the enemy, not knowing whether the Russians were before or behind them.

Once at the top of the hill, Duggan recognized it. It was the hill from which he had taken a look around at the camp and the town on his way out. Far below he could see the dim glow of a few scattered lights along the river, about where the camp and town should be.

Listening in the darkness, he shook his head.

"They're just hittin' along here at the bottom of the hill," he stated. "Ain't there any way we can pass them?" he asked Graves.

After a colloquy with the Cossack, Graves shook his head.

"There's a high hill on this side and a cliff, and the river on the other. We'd have to go two or three miles to get in that way."

"Looks like we're stuck." Daniels shook his head.

"You give me a pain in the neck!" It just needed Daniels' remark to start Duggan going. "Look here, *busca* around and gather in all the dry pine branches you can drag and be damn quick about it!" he ordered, and ran to his horse from which he removed the saddle and shook out the blanket.

There were plenty of pine branches and pine cones. A match was applied, more fuel was piled on until a respectable flame was roaring skywards.

When the fire had reached sufficient size, Duggan stepped in front of it and told Daniels to grab the other side of the blanket.

"I hope to God they're not all dopes in that outfit or all tearin' off bunk fatigue," he growled and then slowly and carefully raised and lowered the blanket, sometimes dropping it quickly and in rapid succession, at other times uncovering the fire for longer periods.

After ten minutes of this he stopped and stared long and anxiously at the camp. The place lay as it had been, silent and immobile; there was no gleam of an answering flash. So quiet and still was the camp that he might have been signaling the dead.

With a groan he started again, raising the blanket in rapid sequence and lowering it as rapidly, varying this with longer flashes.

MAJOR DAVIES, in his tent, could not get himself interested in the magazine. Try as he would, the thought of Duggan would keep recurring to him and constantly obtruding itself between him and the pages at which he stared.

Finally he flung the magazine across his tent and went out, lighting a cigaret and walking moodily in the darkness, drifting aimlessly toward the picket line without knowing where he went.

A sudden sharp order and the smack of a rifle coming to port arms startled him out of his revery.

"Halt! Who goes there?" the voice barked.

"Field officer of the camp!" responded Davies annoyed. He'd forgotten the sentinel on the picket lines.

"Advance, field officer of the camp, and be recognized!" came the next sharp order, and wearily Davies stepped forward, while the sentinel peered in his face across his rifle stock.

"Pass, field officer of the camp!" And the man executed a snappy present arms.

Davies started to pass on his way, when the man spoke again.

"Say, Major, I been noticin' a funny light up there on the hill by the river—it kinda winks and goes out then it winks some more—looks like somebody tryin' to signal."

And Davies looked at the light on the hillside far up the Ussuri River. As he watched, his cigaret dropped unnoticed to the ground.

"Good God!" he exclaimed and then turned and ran, leaving the sentinel staring after him with open mouth.

Flinging himself at a pup tent near the end of the picket line he shouted into it:

"Pile out, saddle up!" The two sleepy men that occupied it tumbled out. It was the mounted detachment that he was attacking and men began to pile out, astonished.

"Get into the saddle as quick as you can—never mind dressing." And when the first sergeant came running up, the major gave him orders. "Get every man you can and follow me past the bridge and up the river road—give me a man for messenger." When a half dressed private appeared, he shouted to him, "Rush to the Third Battalion and have it roused up quietly, in underwear or anything they've got and lead them to the river road past the bridge."

Some ten men quickly saddled up and a saddle had been thrown on his own horse. Leading them out, he galloped toward the bridge and the river road. As he passed the bridge he halted and listened. Far up the road he heard the stir and clump of marching men.

Moving out swiftly he found a position that covered the road. Dismounting his men he lined them up where they had a clear field of fire. Other men were joining him constantly, squads and sections from his battalion, silently and noiselessly, the men eager and anxious to be in on a fight.

The tramp of marching feet grew louder. Far ahead on the road, Davies could see the black and formless mass which betokened the enemy.

Panting, wearing nothing but a pair of breeches and slippers, Judson, one of his captains, reported his company present.

"Lead them around to the flank of this mob coming. Don't fire until you hear a volley from me," he ordered.

Judson disappeared, his men following him at a run in single file.

The advance files of the enemy loomed out of the darkness.

Davies suddenly rose from where he had been concealed.

"Halt!" he shouted at them. "You are surrounded on all sides by the American forces. I will give you one minute to throw down your arms. After one minute we blow you to hell!"

The Russians halted uncertainly. From behind them they could hear the noise of men getting into position. On their ears, from all sides, fell the unpleasant and suggestive sound made by clips being shoved into rifles and the snick and clack of breechblocks driven home.

A stoop shouldered man wearing a saber stepped forward.

"To avoid bloodshed, I surrender my men," he said in precise English.

"Order them to lay down their arms immediately," barked Davies.

The stoop shouldered officer gave a command in Russian. Slowly and grudgingly the men under him began to lay their rifles on the ground. To Donaldson, the captain of one of his companies, Davies gave the job of taking over the prisoners. The Americans were gathered into their squads and companies. There was much growling among them at the ease with which the fight had been won.

Davies grinned as he heard the remarks passed in the ranks.

"Only chance at a scrap since we been here and look what them illegitimate and vermin covered Russkis pull on us!" Or words to that effect, was the burden of the complaint.

Davies, after seeing that the prisoners were put under guard and marched away for the camp, dismissed the remainder of his battalion, and taking two men with him rode up the river road.

He had not advanced very far when a man suddenly rode at him out of the darkness and put a saber point at his throat.

"All right, Duggan, it's all fixed. We got them," called Davies.

The saber dropped. Sergeant Duggan came nearer.

"By God! I thought the jig was up, Major," he said weakly. "I couldn't get a flicker of reply outa the camp."

"Didn't have time," Davies explained. "Had to make it snappy."

They turned about and went towards camp.

Up alongside rode Graves.

"I'm going to hurry over to you-know-where," he said to Duggan. "Want to come along?"

"Sure, we're goin' over to see if Graves' girl landed home right side up with care, Major, if you don't mind."

Duggan and Daniels faded into the darkness, following Graves.

THE small cabin was brilliantly lighted as the three drew up and dismounted.

There was an eager footstep, a glad swirl of a scarlet neckerchief, and Graves was out of his saddle and his arms about the girl.

"Looks like the word 'welcome' on the mat ain't been erased," remarked Duggan sagely, watching the total engulfment of Vera in Graves' arms.

But in a second she was at their sides, inviting them very prettily to come in and join their feast.

The broad shouldered, grayhaired Cossack officer came to the door. She called out to him in Russian. Very gravely and courteously he bowed and added his invitation.

The three tethered their horses and went into the brilliantly lighted room and cast longing eyes on the well spread table and the steaming food. It had been hours since they had eaten.

The old Cossack officer, her father, led the three to the head of the table, gravely seating Duggan at his right hand, with Graves next and Daniels the third. Glasses were filled and a rousing *"Vashies Darovia!"* was shouted by the assembled company.

Great plates of steaming *borsht* soup were placed before the newly arrived guests. Vera, sitting on the right of her father, talked long and earnestly to him. The grayhaired old officer listened gravely and turned, watching Graves as he ate. Finally he nodded and patted his daughter on the shoulder as though in approval. She smiled at Graves.

The grayhaired Cossack carefully filled a glass with vodka, then, handed it past Duggan to Graves.

The hand of the old Cossack officer held out the glass invitingly. Duggan raised his eyes and noticed that the great hairy hand before his face carried on one finger a massive gold ring in which was set a large emerald.

Idly turning his head, he looked again at Vera, where she sat next her father, her eyes alight with happiness and her cheeks glowing. Then Duggan's forehead puckered into a puzzled frown.

For the light was fading from the girl's eyes, her hand was reaching up to her throat as though she felt faint, a look of frightened puzzlement was on her face.

Thinking that she must be ill, Duggan half raised himself, intending to offer his aid. But the direction of her glance was unmistakably on someone that sat beyond him. He turned his head, and then emitted a low gasp of astonishment.

Graves was standing, his face white, his hand trembling, pointing at the grayhaired old Cossack officer. The whiteness of his face accentuated the redness of that long scar across his cheek; the scar itself had turned an angry scarlet.

The table was hushed into silence; no one understanding what it was all about, but all sensing that something out of the ordinary was brewing.

Graves seemed to have great difficulty in speaking. His lips were dry; he moistened them once or twice. Finally his voice came, shaking and trembling with either fear or passion, it could not be told which.

"Tell me:" his voice gathered strength as he proceeded, "Were you ever at one time in command of the Third Squadron of the Nikolaievsk Dragoon Regiment?"

Vera looked with frightened eyes, studying first the face of her father, who twisted his mustache in puzzlement, back to the face of Graves.

The old Cossack officer finally nodded.

"Yes," he answered shortly.

"You were in command the morning of the burning of the village of Lutkavka?"

The old officer looked puzzled.

"Probably," he answered with a shrug of his shoulders. "There was a lot of that work going on. Why do you ask?"

For a minute Graves did not answer. He closed his eyes as though communing with some unknown power. At last he opened them again. His face was deathly pale.

"I asked because—because," he looked at Vera, his voice faltered, "because, in that case, I am sorry, but I cannot eat your bread nor salt." Turning, with shoulders bowed, and the look in his eyes of a man who has forsworn all the joys of Paradise, he stumbled out of the room.

Like a flash, Vera sped after him. The door closed behind them. The guests sat in silence.

"What did that dumb-bell beat it for without finishin' his chow?" Daniels, bent on masticating an immense piece of meat pie, asked of Duggan.

There was no time for an answer. The door opened again.

In the opening stood the young Cossack officer who had returned with the Americans from the house in the woods. Behind him was a squad of American soldiers.

Vera's father rose angrily.

"Stop!" shouted the young officer. "You are hereby arrested for being the leader of a gang of bandits known as the Gray Wolves. You will be tried immediately for attempting to cause war between the Allies through the actions of your followers. I've been posing as a suitor for your daughter's hand for months, on special duty by order of the Ataman, to discover your activities. Your followers are all imprisoned and they have confessed."

To Duggan, watching yet understanding little of what it was all about, it was clear that the old officer had been hit hard. But the grayhaired old fellow rose imperturbably.

"Very well," he answered, "have it your own way. With your permission I should like five minutes to attend a little detail that has to do with clearing the way to my daughter's marriage to an American soldier."

The young Cossack officer, after considering this a moment, nodded his head slowly.

With an ironical bow, the grayhaired father of Vera left the table and walked to the door of an inner room. Standing there a second, he bowed again to the assembled company, then turned and went in. The table grew silent again.

The sudden dull and muffled explosion of a revolver shot startled everyone. The women ran into the small room. They came out screaming. The young Cossack officer investigated. He returned, shaking his head.

"The Gray Wolves will howl no longer," he remarked. "The leader of the pack has killed himself."

While all this had been going on, Daniels had been working very fast with the huge dish of meat pie set before him.

"I'm goin' to finish this here chow," he remarked, washing down a big mouthful with a generous drink of vodka, "no matter what sorta hell busts loose!"

The place was in wild confusion. Men were talking at the tops of their voices. Women were sobbing and wailing. The young Cossack officer and the soldiers disappeared.

The door was opened again.

A hard-boiled American face was shoved in.

"Duggan and Daniels," it rasped, "come on outa this. You're under arrest for consortin' with Russian civilians."

"What's the big idea?" asked Duggan.

"Colonel's orders."

"How come?" Duggan was mildly curious.

"Strict orders to have nothin' to do with Russian civilians on account of a bunch o' Russkis called the Gray Wolves settin' up in business as spies and trouble makers around these parts."

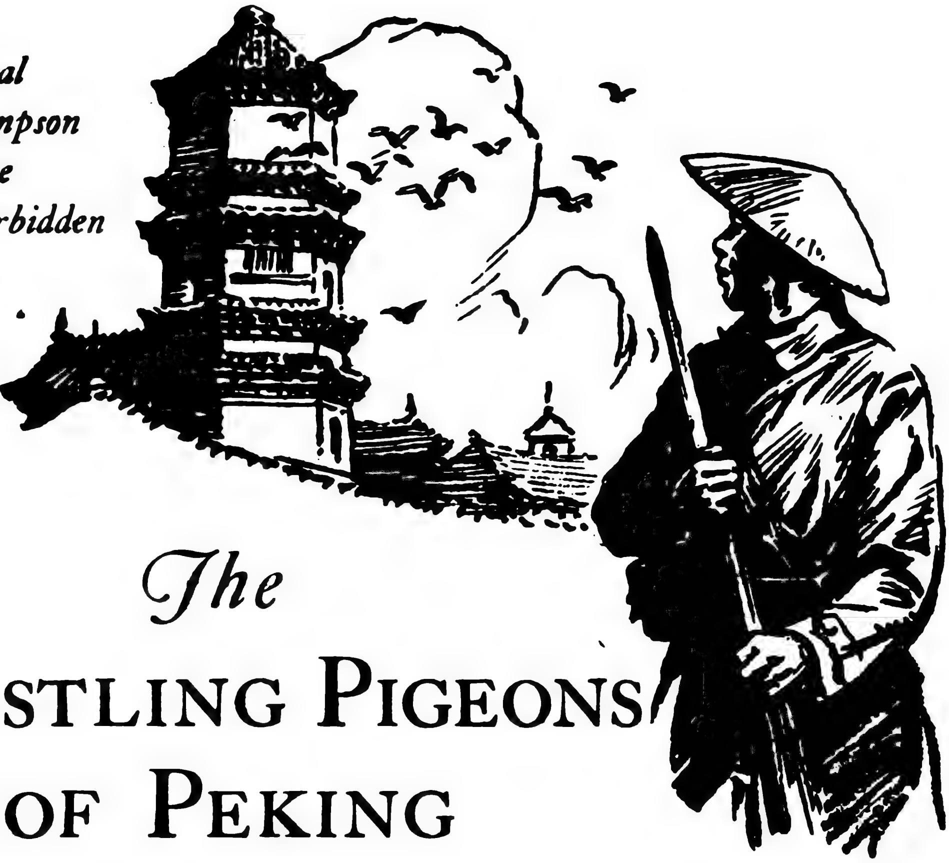
"Why, hell!" Daniels spoke thickly, through a big mouthful. "We corralled all them babies and got 'em safe in the hoosegow. That's a hell of a note, comin' around here and interruptin' a couple of heroes when they're havin' a good dinner."

The hard-boiled one scratched his head uncertainly.

"But I can't help it. Orders is orders—and the colonel's asleep."

"That's the answer." Duggan prepared to follow the hard-boiled one. "The colonel's asleep."

General Joe Thompson in the Purple Forbidden City



The WHISTLING PIGEONS OF PEKING

By L. G. BLOCHMAN

IT IS not true that the best Chinese wars are fought by the Chinese. The remnants of what was once the Republican Chinese Government in Peking has no more to do with the jockeying about of gold braided generals than have the strange flocks of pigeons that go whirring over the old city of Kublai Khan with little bamboo whistles tied in among their tail feathers. If it is an important war, Japan, Russia, and Great Britain are bound to be backing one side or the other. And if it looks like an exciting war, the chances are that Brigadier General Joe Thompson, once an American infantryman, is chief strategist of some Chinese force—usually that of Liao, the border tuchun.

But a war of the first magnitude—at least for the dog days—was now brewing on the Mongolian border, and Thompson, in civilian clothes, was sitting in an old house in the legation quarter of Peking, frowning over a message of death that had just been laid before him.

"That makes three in two days," said Thompson, running his moist fingers through his tomato colored hair, "and not one of 'em got more than ten miles from Peking."

"You ain't gettin' yourself all wrought up about three dead Chinks, are you?" drawled Harry Delaney, propped back in a teak chair, squinting at the ceiling through half closed eyes, apparently without the energy to wipe away the perspiration that was trickling down his dough colored, prematurely lined face. "They're dead, all right, but they're Chinks. Why worry?"

Thompson reread the message on the table before him, then carefully tore it into small bits.

"I worry," he replied, "because these couriers of ours gettin' stabbed in their rickshas or thrown off trains means that somebody's tippin' off Tang's outfit on every move that's made from this house."

Delaney shifted his regard from the ceiling to a bead of perspiration gleaming on the end of his pointed nose. But he shifted nothing else.

"I wish someone would tip me off on what's goin' on in my own army," said Delaney. "Here I am a brigadier general the same as you—even if we can't wear our swell uniforms on account of it bein' open season on Liao generals—and I don't even know when we start out to capture Mongolia, or whatever we're goin' to capture."

"You know as well as I do that we haven't heard from General Liao for three weeks," said Thompson. "He's up beyond Kalgan somewhere, pickin' out the tender spots in the rear of Tang's army. But Tang has managed to keep us cut off. There hasn't been a single message got through in either direction, and five of our messengers bumped off in the bargain."

Harry Delaney finally moved. He brought down the front legs of his chair and mopped his dewy brow with the sleeve of his Palm Beach suit.

"If you'll take the advice of a fellow general—" he began.

"Do I have to keep remindin' you that you're just a fluke general," Thompson interrupted. "If Liao didn't just happen to need a guy to drill his new recruits while I was down fightin' the battle of Ping-Chow, you'd be doin' another turn in the 15th Infantry at Tientsin, or you'd be turnin' yourself inside out at the rail of some home bound transport. . . ."

"But he *did* need a good guy, and you *was* down south, and I *am* a brigadier general in this man's army," said Harry Delaney. "Just because you got your sergeant's chevrons two years before I got mine, you don't think that cuts any limburger in these chop suey armies, do you? Here you been in Liao's outfit a whole year and you're still a brigadier general. Why, Skinny Meeks, who used to be corporal in B Company at Tientsin, he heard two months ago that Tang was lookin' for American noncoms, so he went and enlisted himself as a lieutenant colonel. And he's a major general already."

"Maybe he's the guy that's been amusin' himself murderin' our messenger boys as soon as they get outside the legation quarter," said Thompson. He got up and looked through a crescent shaped window to contemplate the heat of a north China August rising in transparent waves from a sea of gray tiled roofs to distort into drunken curves the century solid masonry lines of the Tartar Wall.

"Joe," said Delaney, opening his squinting green eyes to about three quarters aperture, "you act like you was scared to poke your freckled nose outside this crazy Chinee house."

Thompson whirled about, a glint of hostility in his hard gray eyes. In reply to his unspoken comment, Delaney continued:

"Then what's the idea of sittin' around here waitin' for persimmons to fall into your mouth? You must know about where the generalissimo is—somewhere between Kalgan and Urga to cut off Tang from the Mongolian border. He's probably pretty close to Koshiat, and needin' pretty bad them two dozen machine guns we managed to get hold of and hide away in the Tartar City. I been tellin' you for two weeks we ought to take a chance and send 'em up——"

"The guns ain't hid in the Tartar City," said Thompson sharply.

"Ain't they?" asked Delaney, opening his eyes to full aperture. "Since when ain't they?"

"Since the day after I got back from the south and found you messin' about in my army," replied Thompson. "I've told you a dozen times that there ain't much chance of a bad American sergeant makin' a good Chinese general. Too many people knew where we had our beanshooters hid, and what with civil war rapidly becomin' the leadin' industry of this Celestial kingdom, good machine guns is too much in demand. So I moved 'em."

"Where to?"

Thompson was devoting a great deal of attention to rolling a cigaret.

"I hear Skinny Meeks is lookin' for about two dozen machine guns for General Tang," said Thompson casually.

"You ain't insinuatin' I'd sell out to Tang, are you?"

"I ain't insinuatin' anything," Thompson answered, "only I do know I caught you cheatin' at poker once down in Manila."

Delaney grinned sheepishly.

"I was only a buck private then, Joe," he said. "I've got serious since I been wearin' chevrons. I tell you I get a whole new slant on things, just thinking about the gold braid now tarnishin' on the uniform in the bottom of my trunk. Tell me where the guns are, Joe, and I'll get some camels and take 'em up to Koshiat tonight."

"You just hold your camels about an hour more until people's tiffin has had a decent chance to digest," said Thompson, "and you'll see that General Joe Thompson has got a little idea all his own."

THAT little idea of Joe Thompson's appeared in due time at the supposedly secret headquarters of the Liao military faction, and it wasn't so little. In fact, it stood six feet two in its stocking feet and was broad in proportion. Its name was Jerry Boyle, and it was concisely described by Harry Delaney between two spits of tobacco as being "too handsome to be good for anything." It may have been that Boyle himself had found his charms to be at times too charming for his own welfare. He classed among the major mishaps of his career as stunt aviator for a film concern in Hollywood two marriages and two divorces. And he had come to China to avoid further feminine impediments to his aerial advancement.

For a time he had been doing quite well with an old discarded D. H. plane, taking American tourists for flights through Nankow Pass to look at the Great Wall of China from the air. But the rapid rise of the civil war industry had put a crimp in the tourist trade. What with the three rail approaches to Peking being blown up regularly in rotation by various military factions there hadn't been a decent sized personally conducted tour through the Chinese capital in three months. So, aerially curious parties were not numerous, and Jerry Boyle was headed for the financial rocks. So he told Thompson when he met that red-headed personage in the *Wagons-Lits* bar. The Sino-American general thereupon invited him to call at headquarters, sensing an adventurous soul in the handsome giant, which, in view of the current stringency of the money market, might be put to good use for the cause of General Liao.

The edifice which Thompson had chosen as Liao headquarters in Peking stood in the legation quarter, where fear of foreign guards kept Chinese intrigue from doing its bloody worst. It was down beyond the Glacis, not far from the Yellow Imperial Wall. At one time it must have housed a mandarin of some degree, or a galaxy of priests, for from its courtyard there rose a tower with five spreading roofs, each rippled with jade-green porcelain tile.

General Thompson chose to have his own private quarters in the tower. From its top chamber, as Thompson pointed out to Boyle who followed the puffing Delaney up the spiral stairs, you could see over the Tartar Wall, with its many-storied gates, beyond the Tartar City, almost to the Temple of Heaven. In the other direction you could see into the Purple Forbidden City, with the sweeping yellow roofs of its dozen palaces glistening through the haze of dust left suspended in the air by a hot wind from the Gobi Desert.

Overhead, flying high toward the Forbidden City, soared a flock of white birds, making a peculiar whirr as they passed—a flock of the famous whistling pigeons of Peking.

"Gentlemen," said Thompson, as he motioned Boyle and Delaney to chairs, "since we ain't here to talk about embroidered Manchurian saddle blankets, I won't waste any time gettin' started. Boyle, you've probably heard in the various legation quarter drinkin' places, where white men meet to consolidate their solidarity by spillin' scandalous lies about those as happens to be drinkin' elsewhere, that me and Harry Delaney are a couple of low cutthroats that have got ourselves mixed up in these here Chink wars. Well, we have. I been brigadier general for a year, now, and Delaney, who ain't quite as stupid as he looks, has managed to sneak himself the same number of gold stripes.

"Our boss is up somewhere north of Kalgan, gettin' ready to fight General Tang for the privilege of capturin' Mongolia. We been left here in Peking to pick up a little modern equipment and a few regiments of good cut-rate troops from some bankrupt tuchun. Now Delaney and I have got hold of a nice batch of machine guns that we'd love to get up to General Liao, only we don't know where he is or how he's fixed. We've sent out couriers to try to establish communications, but they've all got themselves killed somehow or other. So I thought of you. We want you to be courier for us."

Boyle laughed a short, surprised laugh, and crossed his legs.

"Thanks," he said, "but I haven't been in China long enough to absorb this Oriental fatalism, I guess. I can't quite believe in reincarnation and the rewards of after life. And besides, I'm two months behind in my insurance premiums."

"Don't get me wrong," Thompson explained. "We ain't lookin' for innocent victims. We want communications established by air. You're an aviator, but you're short on customers. I can't give you back your customers, but I can pay you twice as much as you make off tourist totin' if you join our army."

"Now you're talking sense," said Boyle, uncrossing his legs.

"You mean dollars and cents," amended Delaney.

"Here's your job," continued Thompson. "We think Liao is at Koshiat, north of Kalgan. You'll fly up and make sure. But you won't be able to come back here. As soon as they know you're connected with this outfit, Tang's men will be layin' for you. And they'll know soon enough. Somebody's probably tipped 'em off already.

"So you'll give us the high sign that everything's O. K., and we'll meet you with the machine guns outside the city—say at Tung-Chow. Nobody'll be lookin' for you or for us at Tung-Chow, and we'll be able to load the stuff in your ship and take the works to Liao. Can do?"

"Sure," said Boyle. "That sounds easy. But how'll I flash you that Liao is at Koshiat? Telegraph?"

"You stay away from telegraphs," said Thompson. "In the first place the message would probably be delivered to Tang instead of us. And in the second place you'd probably get yourself all full of bullet holes."

"Then how am I to let you know? Yell?"

"Well, now, not exactly, Major Boyle—I think I'll make you a major to start with. That's a matter that we'll have to think out. I'll just order a little of that yellow Japanese beer to lubricate our thinkin' apparatus. Hey, Henry Pu Ting!" Thompson put his head out the window to call his chubby aid sitting at the base of the tower. "Send up some of that Osaka poison, Henry."

While Thompson's back was turned, Delaney yapped at Boyle:

"I understand you're a pursuit pilot, Handsome."

"Who told you that?"

"Nobody told me. I figured it out for myself from seein' you constantly in pursuit of some hotsy pair o' silk stockin's ever since you been in Peking. Folks around here say you was a high flier even before you got to be an aviator. And I wonder if you ain't makin' a mistake gettin' mixed up in such a completely masculine line of business as these here wars."

"My motto has always been: 'Business before women,'" Boyle replied coldly.

THERE was an embarrassed silence, broken by a sleek Chinese boy arranging glasses under the directon of Henry Pu Ting. When the clinking had stopped, and the foam had settled a bit, Thompson took the makings from his pocket and mutely regarded Delaney and Boyle.

A peculiar droning sound began to bore into the hot afternoon atmosphere—a singing whirr that grew louder.

"Listen," said Boyle.

"The whistlin' pigeons of Peking," said Thompson, twisting the end of a homemade cigaret.

With a sudden movement he twisted the cigaret in two.

"And I'll be a whistlin' pigeon myself," he added with emphasis, "if they don't give me an idea."

He went to the open window and watched the flock as it wheeled low over the courtyard and headed back whistling toward the Forbidden City.

"Henry Pu Ting," Thompson shouted again into the court. "Come up here again, and make it chop-chop."

Henry arrived, breathing hard and smoothing his long, light blue tunic.

"Henry," said Thompson, "you sabe where everything is in Peking. Do you know where the whistlin' pigeons roost?"

"Can make look-see," replied Henry.

"Well, will you do that tonight, and catch me one? Can do?"

"Can do," replied the undemonstrative Henry, ex-comprador.

"All right, Henry, and have the bird here tonight."

The aide saluted with his pudgy hand and left.

"Our signal code between Koshiat and Peking, Major Doyle," said Thompson with a show of dignity, "has just been provided by the particular joss that looks after redheaded generals."

Boyle and Delaney said nothing.

"It's like this. These pigeons that fly over the place ten times a day, beginnin' at early dawn, have been makin' the same funny whirrin' sound for centuries, I guess. Now I don't know what music-lovin' Chinese ties whistles to these birds, but I do know that they always whistle in the same, monotonous tone. Now my idea is to catch one bird out of these whistlin' flocks—Henry Pu Ting will see to that—and change his tune. I'll get a funny off key whistle, one that plays two or three notes like a one cylinder harmonica, and we'll tie it in place of his regular whistle.

"Our flyin' major will take the bird with him in his plane. If Liao is at Koshiat, like we think, and is in a position to take delivery on a bunch of machine guns, Boyle will turn the pigeon loose. He'll be back with his whistlin' buddies here about six hours later, and we can listen for him. With that new tune we give him, we'll be able to pick him out the minute he flies over the house on his morning constitutional.

"Give the birds, say eight hours, to be generous, for gettin' back. Make a note of this, Boyle. Then figure on landing out in the suburbs at Tung-Chow at dark of the same day. We'll dig up the skeeter artillery and smuggle it out to you at Tung-Chow by ten that night. Won't we, Delaney?"

"Anything you say, General," said Delaney, looking out the window.

"And when do I start?" asked Boyle.

"As soon as I get this pigeon caught and tuned," Thompson answered. "Which will be tonight."

"Tonight? Well, I was . . . Very good. Tonight, then. By the way . . ." He approached Thompson and lowered his voice. "I wonder if you could let me have an advance of twenty-five dollars on my salary to buy some gas for my plane?"

"WHAT'S the idea?" drawled Delaney, when Boyle's footsteps had ceased to sound on the spiral staircase. "Can't you fight this war without ringin' in a sissy fillum aviator?"

"I hear he's a pretty danged good aviator," said Thompson.

"He'll throw us down sure," Delaney insisted. "He'll catch a whiff of some new perfume walkin' down the Glacis, or some dame'll wave a tea cup at him, and he'll forget he ever heard of our army. You better let me take them guns up to Liao, Joe. I'll get 'em through tonight, sure."

"You'll get nothin', unless it's a bang on the jaw for disputin' the orders of a general your senior in point of service."

"But listen, Joe. That kid's too good lookin'." Delaney's drawl was quickening. "I see him all the time fightin' tea over at the swell hotel struggles."

Thompson smiled.

"Been cuttin' in on your time, Harry?"

"No foolin', Joe, that kid's been buzzin' around these Russian dames, and you know no good can come of buzzin' around Russian dames in north China; they're either Bolsheviki spies, or they're always hungry. I tell you that kid'll never do us any good."

"You lay off that kid, Harry." Thompson's gray eyes glittered with determination. "I got a hunch and I'm goin' to follow it through. I think the boy's game. Anyhow I'm drawin' to a two-ended straight, and I think I'll fill, all right."

Delaney stuck out his lower jaw a trifle as he looked absently out the window. Then he slowly drew a plug of tobacco from his pocket and viciously bit off a chew.

"Well, then I guess I'll be goin' along, General Thompson," he mumbled, his jaws and tongue as much occupied with tobacco as with speech. "If you want me, send over to the Grand Hotel de Pekin'. I'm goin' over to take dancin' lessons and get my hair marcelled. Then when I get a lot of skirts crazy about me, and a few breach o' promise suits goin', maybe you'll send me off on a mission of trust."

His heels made an unnecessarily loud clatter on the winding stairs.

THOMPSON was sitting alone, looking through his crescent shaped window at the fading outlines of the towering Chao Mein Gate being absorbed by the hot blue dusk. Night was drinking up the barbaric colors of the four legged, square arched *pai-lou* which straddled the road across the way. Warm smells, the creaking of wheelbarrows, and the chant of coolies filled the increasing darkness.

Thompson started, as a step was heard in the courtyard.

"It's just Jerry Boyle," said the big form in the doorway. "I've come to see if our whistling pigeon has arrived."

"Not yet," said Thompson, throwing the beam of a flashlight on Boyle.

"Then there's not really much use in my hopping off tonight," said the aviator. "I won't be able to locate Liao's army in the dark."

Thompson noted that Boyle was attired

in black, carefully pressed trousers and the short, white, tail-less jacket which the foreigner in the Orient effects for formal occasions.

"And besides, it's Saturday night," Thompson added. "You'll be havin' to step out to the Grand Hotel's weekly dance."

"Well, yes," Boyle admitted. "I had thought I might step over there for a minute if the pigeon hadn't got here yet. I'll come by for the bird about midnight, and I'll get off at dawn."

"Where's your plane?" asked Thompson.

"Down in the fields by the Temple of Agriculture," replied Boyle. "That's the only place around here where I can land without coming down on a funeral procession or a propaganda bureau."

"Can I depend on you to get away at dawn—in spite of the dance?"

"Count on me to the limit."

"Good luck, then. And I'll be listenin' for the pigeon."

But Thompson decided to do a little listening—and looking—before hand. When Henry Pu Ting arrived with the bird and the little bamboo tubes which were to produce a two note call, like the cry of the curlew, Thompson sent him out again.

"I want you to get hold of a man," he said, "who can get hold of another man far enough away from us so he won't get himself shot as a spy or an ex-cabinet minister if he strays outside the legation quarter. See that the third party is at the Temple of Agriculture before dawn, and can give us a full report of the take-off of Major Boyle's airplane."

The blaze of dawn had hardly withered into the dry glare of another scorching day when Henry Pu Ting was in Thompson's barren bedroom with the morning tea—Thompson had long ago given up trying to drink Chinese-made coffee—and the news that Boyle's plane was in the air.

"Good," said the general, propping himself up on one elbow. "Was the major alone?"

"He have small size package . . ."

"That's the bird cage."

". . . And one piece lady," Henry finished.

"A lady?"

"Yes, Gen'l. One piece No. 1 yellow hair lady, and eyes color all same Temple of Heaven blue roof."

"Well, I'll be damned." Thompson swung his feet over the edge of his bed, blinked, and ruffled his red hair. "Sure it was a lady?"

"Casual examination so indicates, Gen'l," Henry replied.

Thompson rubbed hisc eyes thoughtfully.

"Henry," he said, "do you remember where you got that whistle we sewed on that pigeon?"

"From blind whistle seller living inside Many Years Happiness Street," was the reply.

"Tell him to come around and see me today — privately," said Thompson. "It looks as though you and me were goin' to have to dope this war out on our own account."

THE day which began thus inauspiciously continued to be well nigh intolerable for Thompson. The hot, sand filled wind cracked his dry lips and parched his throat. The beer he called for to unparch things was warm. To aggravate matters, Delaney strutted about headquarters as though he were particularly pleased with himself. He called Thompson "Old Red Joe," spat tobacco juice on the stone curls of a *Fo* dog in the courtyard, and repeated his belief that Pretty Jerry Boyle would never make good.

"His plane got away all right," Thompson retorted.

"Yes, but God knows where to. More'n likely he heard of some new musical show come to Shanghai, and flew down to date up the chorus. You'll see, Old Red Joe. After you sit around here a week more waitin' for that fool pigeon to come back here whistlin' the Star Spangled Banner, you'll end up by turning them machine guns over to me and sendin' me up after Liao. You might just as well give 'em to me today, Joe, and save all that time. I'll see that they get to Liao, all right."

Thompson mopped his freckled brow with a square yard of handkerchief, frowned, and then replied:

"Harry, keepin' your mouth open that way dries up your insides and gets your vocabulary all full o' dust. So you just better keep it closed these hot days—particularly as your senseless yappin' ain't makin' a whit of an impression on me. I got my mind made up on how them guns are goin' to move, and that's just the way they're goin' to move."

Then, with just the vestige of a wistful frown playing over his features, he looked square into Delaney's green eyes.

And Delaney turned to walk through a diamond shaped doorway into the courtyard, where he added another glistening brown spot to the *Fo* dog's stone curls.

Delaney reopened the discussion that night, climbing to Thompson's tower, where the red-headed general seemed deep in conversation with Henry Pu Ting.

"Joe, how long are you goin' to wait on that pigeon before you finally do something about them guns?" he asked.

"I won't have to wait long," replied Thompson, "because Boyle ought to have located Liao by this time, and the pigeon will be back here tomorrow."

"That's what you say. But suppose he didn't get up to Koshiat. And suppose the bird don't come whistlin' back. You ain't goin' to wait more than three or four days, are you?"

"No, Harry, I ain't. I'll send you up there before that—with another pigeon."

Thompson yawned.

"You better send me up with them machine guns and quit foolin' around with birds," said Delaney. "You ain't a naturalist."

"I hope you sleep well," said Thompson, yawning again. "And I'll see you tomorrow."

He did—and early. Delaney burst in on Thompson before Henry Pu Ting had been up with the tea. The streets were barely awake. The creak of an occasional wheelbarrow, and the cry of an itinerant restaurateur were all there was to greet the dawn. Even the rare horse or string of camels was without its usual following of urchins in rags, armed with bamboo rake and basket for the collection of potential fuel.

"Hey, Joe!" cried Delaney excitedly. "Your pigeon is back and whistlin' its fool head off."

Thompson stirred heavily, grunted, sat up, and blinked.

"Where's my tea," he inquired thickly.

"Listen, Joe," repeated Delaney. "Listen to the whistlin' pigeons."

Through the singing whirr of the whistling flock as it passed overhead, there came a peculiar two note strain, oft repeated, like the cry of a curlew.

"Listen at him whistle," said Thompson after a moment.

"Sounds almost like there was two of 'em," said Delaney.

"I told you we wouldn't have to wait," said Thompson.

"I'm glad we don't," Delaney declared. "I crave action."

"You're liable to get it," added Thompson.

"Hadn't I better go out to the arsenal this morning and get the guns packed and ready to move?" asked Delaney.

"They're all ready."

"How about transportation to Tung-Chow?"

"Oh, we'll see about that later."

Thompson's apparent indifference riled Delaney. He used up much tobacco and shoe leather, walking around the courtyard, climbing the spiral stairs to Thompson's jade-green tower, and adding to the nicotine adornment of the grinning *Fo* dog's granite fur, to vent his impatience.

Thompson moved about his daily routine with great deliberation, and took an extra long time over tiffin. When the whistling pigeons flew over the house for the third time that sultry afternoon, Delaney went to Thompson's chamber in a near frenzy.

"Say, Joe, snap out of it," he shouted. "Tell me where to go to get the rattles. You told Handsome Boyle we'd have 'em in Tung-Chow by ten tonight. That means we got to get 'em out of Peking before the gates close."

But Thompson was teaching Henry Pu Ting how to play checkers, and appeared not to hear.

"Don't move there," said Thompson to Henry, "I'd jump your king."

"Are you listenin' to me, Red Thompson?"

"Sure. What did you say?"

"I said we'd have to hustle to get them guns headed toward Tung-Chow before the gates close."

"Oh, that," said Thompson. "I've changed all that. It's your move, Henry."

"What's changed, Joe?"

"I'm not goin' to get the machine guns out until midnight."

"Midnight? Why you told Boyle we'd be in Tung-Chow by ten."

"He'll wait."

"But how're you goin' to get out of Peking? The gates'll be closed."

"Gatekeepers have been bribed before this," said Thompson.

"And the transportation?" inquired Delaney, scowling.

Thompson looked up from the checkerboard for the first time since Delaney's entrance. He studied Delaney's face for a moment, and again contemplated the checkerboard in silence for a moment. Then he said:

"Wheelbarrows'll attract the least attention in the city. I'll get some flivvers to wait outside the walls. And—and you can tend to gettin' me about ten hefty barrow coolies."

Thompson looked up again. He noted that Delaney's scowl had vanished.

"O. K., Joe," said Delaney. "I'll get the coolies."

"Have 'em wait over by that red and green *pai-lou* at the entrance to the Imperial City," said Thompson.

"They'll be waitin'."

THEY were. They seemed to Thompson to be enormous, well fed coolies, as much as he could make out of them squatting by their huge wheeled vehicles in the shadow.

"Tell them to follow us," he ordered, as Delaney's ricksha drew alongside his.

Thompson's ricksha led the strange caravan through dark, silent streets of the yellow Imperial City, twisting and turning as he gave orders to the perspiring coolies between the shafts.

From time to time Thompson looked back at the string of barrow men following in the warm night. Once he thought he saw a ricksha trailing at the end of the procession, but he couldn't make sure in the darkness.

Thompson halted his ricksha in front of a low, unlighted building, and hopped out before his coolie had laid the shafts on the ground. Glancing over his shoulder, he walked swiftly behind the spirit wall which protected the portals of the building against erring and evil spirits which infest the atmosphere of superstitious China. He drew from his pocket a long brass claw with which he prodded the interior of a prismatic Chinese padlock affixed to a heavy door.

"This is a helluva place for an arsenal," said Delaney, stepping behind the spirit wall.

"Ain't it, though," agreed Thompson, pushing back the complaining door.

As soon as the door swung open, Delaney stepped forward quickly. His right hand made a sudden gesture. Although it was blurred by the darkness, Thompson seemed to anticipate it.

He lunged, just as Delaney's revolver spurted thunder and lightning.

The impact of Thompson's shoulder spoiled the aim. Delaney went sprawling through the doorway.

Thompson received with calm and silence this proof of his colleague's treachery. Although Thompson had come alone, he seemed to have expected this duplicity, which exposed itself the moment the location of the machine gun cache was revealed.

Thompson pounced on Delaney in the darkness.

"Skinny!" yelled Delaney.

"Skinny Meeks!" snorted Thompson. "I mighta known it. Why don't you yell for Tang himself, you two faced, back stabbin' son of a sergeant major."

Out of epithets and wind, Thompson twisted Delaney's arm behind him.

Three of the big barrow coolies leaped into the house, one of them holding a globular lantern of red varnished paper. As the trio made for Thompson, five more coolies appeared.

Then Joe let go of Delaney, rose, kicked out the lantern, and rushed for the door, pulling it shut behind him.

But before he could slip the long Chinese padlock into place, he was seized from behind by two Manchu coolies. Whatever their orders were, these coolies had the build and the determination to carry them out.

They yanked Thompson easily and brutally away from the door, which creaked open to release the panic-stricken group of coolies who had been yelling in the darkness.

Thompson made a hurried calculation of the odds against him, and decided on the better part of valor. He freed himself by sending a mulelike kick backward into the abdominal cavity of one of his captors and leaving a torn sleeve of his coat in the hands of the other.

"Where is he?" shouted an American voice somewhere ahead in the darkness.

Thompson veered to the right.

"There he goes," directed Delaney's voice behind him.

A fusillade rattled through the night. Thompson felt the breath of a bullet as it sang by him, and he dropped to the ground instinctively.

"Got him," triumphantly announced Delaney.

Thompson lay still.

"Better make sure," advocated another voice.

Then Thompson began to crawl on his stomach, feeling his way along the wall of a house.

There was a banging noise above his head. The Chinese occupant of the house, awakened by the shooting, was shutting out the sound of any political opinions expressed in the modern manner.

Thompson felt a corner, crept around it cautiously, and raised himself on his haunches.

"I thought you said you got him," said a voice.

"I saw him drop," came the reply. "At any rate he won't go far. He's wounded, anyhow."

"If he turned in here he won't get far. This is a blind alley."

Thompson gave an involuntary start, and peered about him in the darkness. There was indeed a wall that blacked out the stars at the end of his alley.

"I tell you what, Skinny," said a voice Thompson recognized as Delaney's. "You stay here and put the hounds on the redhead before takin' the machine guns outa that Chink barn he hid 'em in. I'll go back and take over his headquarters. We might find something there Tang could use. Some message might come through before they get wise."

"What about that aviator?"

"Who? Handsome Boyle?" Delaney cackled. "Don't lose any sleep over that dude. Sonia's got him in hand, all right. Any skirt could make a guy like that stand on his hind legs and eat out of her hand. And you can depend on Sonia bein' extra special. She was keen on the job. He won't bother us none."

"Good. Beat it, then."

"See you tomorrow at Tang's."

THERE was a long silence. Delaney had apparently gone, leaving Meeks behind.

Thompson found himself in a doorway, and stood up, taking care to make no sound.

He saw Skinny Meeks walk cautiously into the alley. In one hand, held in front of him, something gleamed slightly as he turned searchingly from one side to the other. Thompson could have killed him as he passed, but he saw five figures standing at the entrance to the alley—Delaney's coolies.

Skinny Meeks stopped suddenly and stood still, as though listening.

Thompson's heart stuttered. He was discovered, sure! He would run for it, and shoot it out with the coolies. They were probably bum shots . . .

Then Meeks struck a match on his trousers and lit a cigaret.

The flare illuminated for a second the wall at the end of the alley. It was dull pink and bore a tier of yellow tiles along the top—the Yellow Wall that separates the Imperial City from the legation quarter.

An impulse—one of those flashes of happy inspiration that come to the active minds of men of action forced into a moment of inactivity—caused Thompson to let out a whoop like a circus steam calliope with the keys tied down.

Meeks straightened up, but scarcely before Thompson was on his shoulders, kicking his heels into Meeks' bony sides, getting one foot up, then grasping the upturned eaves of a convenient house and swinging himself to the roof. The fugitive ran uncertainly along the sloping roof, as tiles snapped and crunched under his feet.

When Meeks opened fire, Thompson stopped, slipped, caught the ridgepole to keep from rolling off the roof at the feet of his adversary, and dragged himself to the point at which the ridgepole butted against the Yellow Wall.

A leap, a dizzy moment, and he landed in a stunned, aching heap on the legation quarter side of the wall.

They would never dare pursue him in the legation quarter; at least, not openly. Shooting would call for action from the legation guard. But to make doubly sure, Thompson took side streets in making his way back to his headquarters.

He watched the building from down the street for fifteen minutes before venturing close. When he did approach, it was slowly and in carefully selected shadows.

Within ten feet of his own house he felt a hand grasp his shoulder from behind.

He whirled about, swinging his clenched fist where he judged a chin to be.

There was the sharp smack of flesh on

flesh, which was followed by a short grunt.

Then Thompson was bending over a bulky, inert mass.

The mass groaned, then said:

"Please not hit so loud, Gen'l Thompson. They can mebbe hear."

It was Henry Pu Ting.

"For Pete's sake, Henry, I didn't know it was you. I hope I didn't hurt you. Who don't you want to hear, Henry?"

"Gen'l Delaney and Major Boyle . . ."

"Boyle? Here?"

"Both now make long talk-talk inside house. Boyle, he come half hour befo', waiting see Gen'l Thompson. Just now come Delaney who make plenty piece talk. Me come this side warning Gen'l Thompson."

"Thanks, Henry," said Thompson. "Let's sneak around back."

They passed quietly through the courtyard and crept up to the crescent shaped window through which a light shone. Thompson looked in.

He saw Boyle standing helplessly against the wall, his hands raised in surrender above his broad shoulders. With his back to the window was Delaney, leaning across a mahogany table with the butt of a revolver resting on the polished table top.

"By God, Handsome," Delaney was drawling, "if you don't tell me where that girl is I'll shoot that pretty mug of yours into a bunch of tripe."

"I tell you she's walking to Tientsin," said Boyle, pale as the wall he was standing against. "That's the truth as far as I know. You can believe it or not. And shoot away."

"Don't hand me that line of bunk," said Delaney. "Girls don't walk home from airplane rides. Where is she? And quick, or I'll——"

"What would Thompson say if you did anything like that?"

"I tell you Thompson's out of this. He's dead, in fact. I'm boss around here now."

Boyle's eyes roved about the room, as though for some solace in his predicament. As they stopped at the crescent shaped window, the color came back into his face, and his lips drew tighter.

Delaney saw the change in his expression, and turned his head just in time to see Thompson's face disappear from the window.

In a flash Boyle's hands were down, overturning the heavy table on Delaney, and twisting his revolver from his grasp.

Outside, Thompson was making for the door in long strides. But they were not long enough, for the room had two doors.

Delaney, his pasty face a shade more pasty than usual, had squirmed from underneath the table and had hurriedly departed by the second door before Thompson burst through the first.

"He didn't seem anxious to see you," said Boyle, laughing with nervous relief as he fumbled for a cigaret.

"He's got business elsewhere," Thompson said. "He sold out to Tang."

"Then that explains that woman," said Boyle. "Delaney seems to own stock in that dizzy Russian blonde, Sonia, that got me to take her up. I met her at the Grand Hotel dance that night, and she offered me $250 to fly her to Tientsin by plane. That was the day I was supposed to go to Koshiat, but Tientsin was only a couple of hours out of my way. She was a good-looker, and besides I needed the dough to catch up on my alimony payments to a couple of exwives in Hollywood. Well, we'd been up about half an hour, when I turned around and saw her fooling with the cage of our whistling pigeon. So I went into an Immelman turn to scare the idea out of her. Then I came down and put her ashore. I guess she's walking yet . . ."

Boyle stopped to regard his hand—the one which held the cigaret. It was shaking.

"Come on up in my tower for a little tea or *skee,* as your taste may run," said Thompson, "and you'll feel more like telling me the rest."

AS THEY crossed the courtyard, the first noises of the new day were beginning to be heard in the street. The sky was paling, throwing into silhouette the massive eastern gates of the Tartar Wall. By the time the pair reached the top of the spiral staircase, they could distinguish an anemic glow on Coal Hill, Peking's only protuberance.

Out of the lighter east a flock of pigeons came wheeling. As they flew nearer, their peculiar whirr sang through the still air. Then, above the monotonous song of the whistling flock came a two note call, like the cry of a curlew.

Thompson's mouth opened.

"Listen," he said. "It's our signal pigeon. Then it got loose after all?"

"Got loose? Why, I turned him loose."

"Where at?"

"Why at Koshiat."

"Then you did get to Koshiat?"

"Sure, I did," asserted Boyle. "Liao is dug in up there and waiting for the guns. Didn't you hear my pigeon whistling all about it yesterday?"

"Well, I'll be gosh darned!" said Thompson, clanking two glasses to the table. "And here I got me a duplicate whistle and paid a little China boy a dollar to sit up in the attic of the house next door and blow the damned thing every time the birds came by."

"Why did you do that?" asked Boyle, pouring himself about three fingers of breakfast.

"Because I heard about that dizzy blonde," replied Thompson. "I figured you'd never get as far as Koshiat."

"Business before blondes is my motto," said Boyle. "But if you thought I was throwing you down, why did you rig up the whistling pigeon fake and go through the motions of going for the machine guns?"

"That was for another angle," said Thompson, gulping down a few drops of breakfast himself. "I wanted Delaney to come out in the open. I been suspectin' for some time he sold out to his friend, Skinny Meeks, who is some kind of a snooper or sniper for General Tang."

"But Henry Pu Ting said you went out alone tonight?"

"Yep. There was a chance that I was mistaken, and I couldn't take along a bodyguard, like I was suspicious of a fellow general."

"But you risked losing the guns!"

"Oh no. They weren't at the place where I took Delaney. By the way, where's your plane?"

"On the Glacis. When you didn't show up at Tung-Chow at ten, as you said you would, I waited a while and then took a chance and flew over here to see what the trouble was."

"Good. You can take us both over to Tung-Chow when you've finished your breakfast."

"And the machine guns?"

"Oh, they're in Tung-Chow already. They been there for weeks. I moved 'em there as soon as I found that Delaney had horned his way into this here army. I caught Delaney cheatin' at poker once when the two of us were soldierin' down in the Philippines . . ."

Thompson poured out two more good-sized drinks.

Henry Pu Ting appeared in the doorway, his moon face well bandaged.

"One piece man, five piece boy wanchee see Gen'l Thompson," he announced.

"What do they want, Henry?"

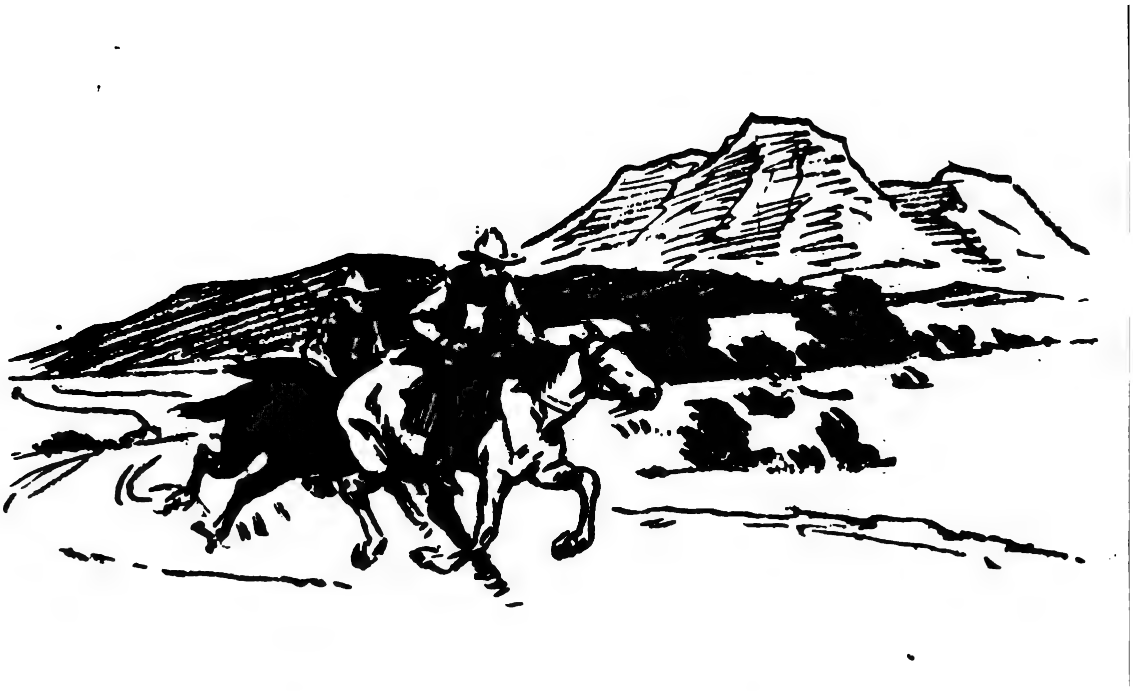
"Man is blind whistle seller living Many Years Happiness Street who have one dozen new No. 1 sweet voice whistles to sell Gen'l. Five piece boy all asking blow whistle topside house like small boy yestiddy. Can whistle loud, ask only five cash one hour.'

"Tell 'em all to go whistle at their grandmothers, Henry," said Thompson, pushing his bulky aide through the door before him, "because we're leavin' for Koshiat right away."

"I'm glad," said Boyle, his eyes taking on a far-away look of contentment, "because before I hopped off from Koshiat yesterday I met a dickens of a good looking little. . . ."

But Thompson was already halfway down the stairway.

A writer of many corking yarns of the far places, T. Samson Miller, *appears again in* Everybody's *next issue after a long absence, with a tale full of the spell of darkest Africa, "On The Ivories."*



CROOKED TRAILS

By DON CAMERON SHAFER

CHAPTER I

BAD NEWS

"LEAVE it t' me an' th' boys," grinned the dusty, sweat begrimed Allen, as he stood there in blue checkered shirt sleeves and flapping vest, his rusty leather chaparajos flecked with the white lather of a hurried ride in to the ranch-house. "Jest leave it t' us. That young feller won't tarry 'round here but a few days."

"Not if I can help it!"

"Jest leave th' petty details t' us." This was a game Allen Tingue could enjoy. "He won't be hangin' 'round here no time a-tall."

Allen loved a rough joke, the rougher the better. For he was one of those rough and ready men who enjoy the discomfiture of their fellows, who laugh mightily over slapstick and horseplay—and he liked nothing better than hazing some Eastern greenie.

"Of all the damned things!" A hard note sounded in Reed Howgan's voice as his chair scraped noisily over the rough floor and he came up standing in wrath and hate. "Why should he come way out here now, at this time?"

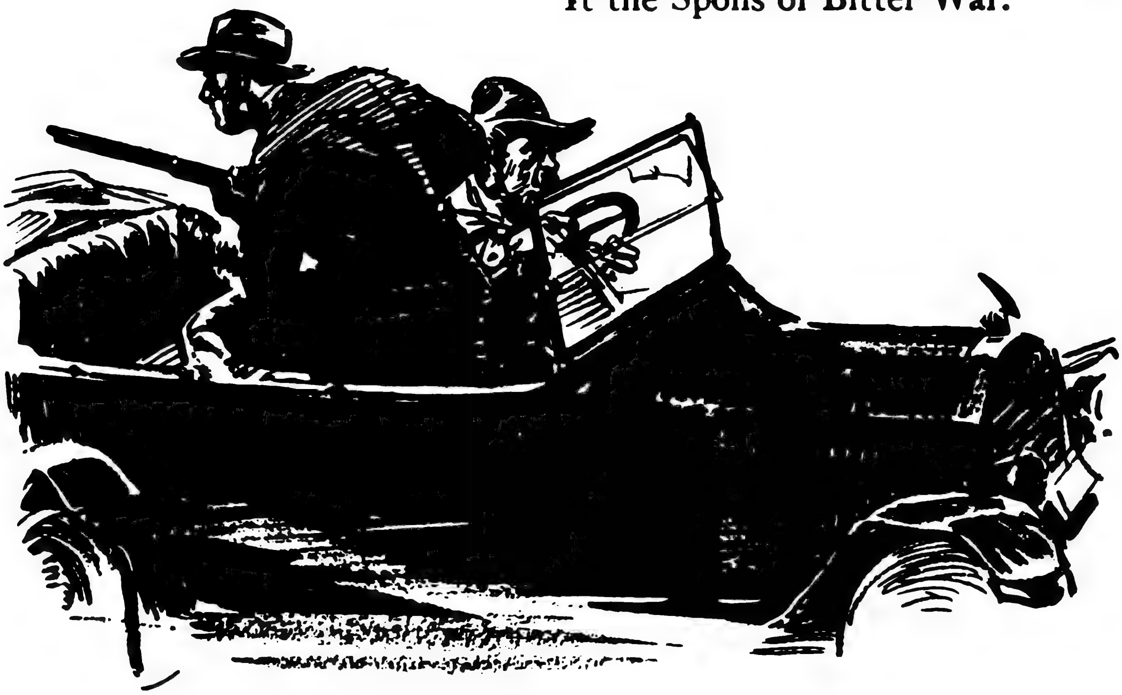
"Tough luck," echoed Allen, dragging a grimy, bluish sleeve across his damp and dusty face, "but don't worry none. Let him come. He won't linger long enough t' furnish decent amusement fer th' boys!"

A strong man physically, this Allen, a hard-riding man, his long and bony legs bent like the ribs of an old horse. His angular frame in rough clothing, blue overalls beneath weathered chaps, jammed down into stirrup chaffed boots. A long and deeply lined face, sweat streaked, actually disfigured by a huge red walrus mustache, which was the man's pride. Allen Tingue was a man willing to work hard, to live hard and to fight hard, though no more than an ignorant frontiersman, always and ever servile and obedient to the authority and dominance of such dangerous men as Reed Howgan.

"What makes you so sure he's comin' t' pay us a visit?" he asked.

"Jimmy MacLaury just rode through. I'd rather he'd left me a skunk in a bag than this." "This" was the familiar yellow sheet of a telegram. "Wired that he's on his way here," he said, crumpling

Beginning a Two Part Novel of the West—the Story of a Far Flung Range and of the Men, Crooked and Courageous, Who Made It the Spoils of Bitter War.



the paper savagely in his huge fist. "Now!"

"Maybe you could head him off," suggested Allen.

"How?"

"Tell him we got th' smallpox or somethin'," chuckled Allen.

"He's on his way west. We can't reach him with a wire to tell him anything." Reed was in an ugly and sullen mood. "Don't be a bigger fool than nature intended!"

"Maybe he thinks jest because he owns this place," laughed Allen, in a throaty way he had, "that he's got a right t' come an' look it over jest once!"

"I won't have him!" cried Reed.

"I suppose you've sent fer me t' go down an' shoot him when he steps offen th' train!"

"If this was twenty years ago," and Reed meant it, "I would do that very thing!"

"It ain't," added Allen.

"We can't stop him from coming," continued Reed, "but we can make his visit here short and painful."

"I'll say we can!" grinned Allen in eager anticipation. "I'll bet he's plannin' t' ride some noble steed over th' great plains, t' shoot wooly buffalo an' fight Injuns——"

"I don't know what he thinks," broke in Reed. "All I know is that I get this message out of a clear sky—and he's never yearned to come way out here before."

"You don't think he's heard somethin'?"

"How could he?"

"I don't know. But news sure has a way o' leakin' out. You let a man wink twict at a widder in Spring City an' they'll hear about it in Denver tomorry mornin'."

"I'll find a way to plug his ears!"

Once upon a time this Reed Howgan had been a hard muscled, lean and powerful outdoor man, proud of his strength and endurance. Now he was a bit too heavy, sitting comfortably on a worn sheepskin in his big chair. Now a fat and flabby man, dark and suave, yet not obese, and not inactive with the handicap of too much soft flesh. Round belly and round face, thick arms and thighs, evidencing that he lived well. And yet his giant strength had not left him nor had his courage softened because of an easy life as manager of this Bar R Ranch. His dark eyes were a bit muddy, a trifle squinty, his swart face damp and oily, none too clean.

"The damned Eastern dude," came bitterly from Howgan's thick and purplish lips behind which yellow teeth gleamed. "He'll be in Spring City tomorrow morning."

"Somebody'll have t' go an' get him."

"You're elected!" cried Reed. Hate rang in his voice.

"Ho, ho, ho," laughed Allen. "I'll sure give him th' ride o' his life!"

"You can dump him into some coulée for all I care," retorted Reed truthfully. "And while you're gone the rest of us will fix up this place to receive him."

A stuffy, sweltering room, disheveled, now stifling hot, the quivering air hot, and heavy with minute yellow dust motes floating thickly in every streaming banner of strong sunlight leaking through curtained windows and closed doors. The wabbly table between the two men was piled high with dust covered papers, with fingerprinted account books, yellowing newspapers and torn stock journals. Along the walls and in the corners were saddles, bits of harness leather, tools, old clothing; a little of everything, such as accumulates in rooms seldom cleaned and never orderly. The three worn chairs had dried out and come apart long ago and had been mended and reinforced with strips of brindle rawhide dried and shrunken hard as iron.

"Jest you leave it t' me," said Allen confidently. "I'll haze that greenie out o' here in less'n a week."

"No you won't," corrected Reed. "We must not forget that he is the owner of this ranch. We don't want him mad, just disgusted."

"I don't aim t' rile him none——"

"Everything must appear perfectly regular and natural," the boss speaking now, giving his orders, "and yet so cleverly devised that he won't suspect." Reed had it all thought out. "We've got to make him hate this place."

"In one week," grinned the obedient Allen, "assisted by a hot sun an' relentless natoor, I'll have that hombre so he'll shudder when he sees a picture card o' this here desert country."

"Now you're talking," said Reed. "Now you've got the big idea."

"It won't require much human effort neither," sighed the tired Allen, mopping his wet face. "He's sure picked out th' right moment t' see this desert country at its worst. It's hot an' dry an' desolate. A man can hate it now without half tryin'."

"I hate the sight of it myself," groaned Reed with a crackling oath, "but this God-forsaken, sunburned landscape is in our favor now."

"We can stand it a while, heh?" Allen winked. "We can survive a few more weeks, heh?" Another wink. "Then we'll be ridin' north where it's green and cool, an' with somethin' besides our hands in our pockets!"

"If we all play the game right," agreed Reed. "But he mustn't suspect it isn't all the real thing."

"I never tipped my hand yet, did I?"

"No, and you better not now." There was a threat in Reed's rasping voice. "If anyone falls down on his part he'll sure have to look me in the eye and explain. If you all carry out my orders, everything will be all right, just as we figgered before this bad news broke."

"We alwus have, ain't we?" said Allen petulantly.

"He'll be here tomorrow night," Reed went on, ignoring this last. "I'll bet you a thin dime when he arrives he won't find this place any fancy mountain resort."

"I'll say he won't!"

"You tell Steve to drive down some of the poorest stuff, close to the ranch-house. Them cows'll tell him how dry it is."

"You bet they will!"

"The sight of a few old bandboxes, hungry and thirsty, will prepare him for what I've got to tell him about the rest of the stock. You tell Charley to round up a few of the oldest and poorest hosses, so if this feller wants to ride around he won't get too far an' see too much."

"I'll tell him."

"Have someone kill a beef—a tough old bull. We'll be on emergency rations while he's here—bull and beans. He sure won't think this is any swell hotel!"

"Th' boys'll kick about th' grub," warned Allen who also liked his victuals.

"You warn them to play the game, even if it hurts," Reed fumed. "We've all got too much at stake to take any chances now. Those feeding from the chuck wagon will fare all right, but the rest of us will be on short rations while that fellow's here."

"I can afford t' fast a while."

"See that he has a bum time, that's all. He'll soon yearn for civilization—an' music with his meals."

"You leave it t' me," promised Allen.

"A rough life, rough food, rough ways." Reed had it all worked out. "If he rides let it be on the roughest, hottest trails into the most desolate country. If he wants to hunt take him where there isn't any game. Fill his eyes with this barren waste. Instruct the boys that they must not visit with him. Act dumb—it won't be much trouble for some of them! Leave him alone as much as possible, but keep an eye out where he goes. He'll soon get sick and tired of it."

"You leave it t' me," chuckled Allen.

"And tomorrow morning, bright and early, you run down to Spring City and bring back our trouble."

CHAPTER II

AN OLD MAN DIES

"IT'S mine," muttered Reed Howgan, after Allen had gone. "It's all mine—if there is any justice in this world—and I won't permit a stranger, an Eastern pilgrim, a college freshie, to take it away from me!"

In truth the Bar R was Reed's in everything but title. Reed was the resident manager, he was the boss, he could do with the ranch and its cattle anything he wanted to do. He could make it pay or make it lose, improve the property and the stock or let it revert back to wilderness and longhorns. But the title—that was the sore place! For years and years now Reed had run this ranch in his own manner, just as though the property actually belonged to him to the last acre and the last head of stock. He bought and sold at his own discretion and he handled all the money, up to the point where a little of it was sent reluctantly to the actual owner through an old lawyer in Spring City.

"If Old Man Reiker had treated me fairly," Reed cursed the memory of Reiker, "I wouldn't have a worry in the world!"

His worries materialized on the morrow.

Reed actually believed that Old Man Reiker, the former owner and his employer, had cheated him out of his just due by dying and leaving all his property to an Eastern schoolboy who was not even a distant relative. Therefore whatever Reed did, or might do, with old "Stuffy" Reiker dead and gone, was easily explained away, easily justified, by the never forgotten injustice of the inheritance laws. Reed was one of those men who consider that they are within their own rights to "get even," if they can.

To let Reed tell it, as he often did over the sloppy bar at MacHeeney's, he alone had carved that ranch right out of the howling wilderness. He had built it up and made it pay in spite of the eccentricities of Reiker. And after Reed had done this, worked like a slave, made Reiker rich, when Stuffy was done with the place, with no relatives to claim the property, it was no more than justice that the ranch should have gone to the man who made it. He found plenty of bar loungers to agree with him, too—so long as his silver rolled on the mahogany.

There is no denying that Reed, as Reiker's foreman, had worked hard and faithful—the Old Man's Dutch thrift had seen to this. Reed, in those days, worked hard, lived hard, rode hard, but always he had been well paid for it in hard money. He never would admit that the ranch was a success, in spite of everything, solely because of the hard thinking, the clever planning of Stuffy Reiker.

Reed knew nothing about those dark hours when Reiker was staggering along with heavy debts, of lean years as well as fat, of losses and notes, blizzards and droughts, taxes and rustlers, and all the other things combined to make the early cattle business always precarious and ever a gamble. Reed swung up into the boss's saddle when the riding was good, when the price of beef was high—so he took all the credit.

Old Stuffy Reiker, going it alone, shoved back and ever backward, west and ever westward, from longhorns to Herefords, pushed right off the green rolling plains which he had helped take from the woolly buffalo and the red Indians. Chased way back in the hills, run out of that, finally, by dry farmers, crowded right to the ragged edge of the world. Homesteaders, squatters, small farmers, villages and cities, pouring out of the East, shoving the cattle business to the last western fringe of arable land, to the very beginning of the desert, the very feet of the mountains.

Right here the genius of Old Stuffy was most apparent. Every summer when the Big Thirst was upon them he knew how to shift his herds, to drive his stock from one pasture to another. He knew just when to push his cows up into the Government forest preserve, with or without a permit, as the case might be. And just when, if chased out of there, to take them over into the forbidden Navajo reservation when the moon was just right. After all, those dusky sons of the desert cared nothing for stock.. They preferred the merry jingle of bright silver to the lowing of cows.

Reed Howgan, doing his foreman's work, carrying out Stuffy's orders, always imagined that he had done all this himself. By some peculiar twist in the man's brain he always thought of Reiker as a feeble and petulant old man who had to be humored. But always as he rode as Reiker's foreman, Reed comforted himself with the happy thought that some day, when the Old Man was gone, he would have the ranch—the land and all the stock, even the money in the bank, if it happened during a year when there was any money in the bank. There was no one, as he knew, neither kith nor kin, to inherit the place by law. He felt certain that Reiker would reward him with a gift of the ranch. Nor was Reed above a gentle hint or two to this effect.

Old Stuffy—Dow Reiker on his bank paper—pioneer, frontiersman and cattleman, was dead and gone now, but he lived green forever in the memory of those old-timers scattered up and down the desert edge of the cattle country. Old Stuffy, they will tell you, was an original; and more stories were told about him than any other Western character of his day. "Stuffy" he was called, because his nose had been broken by a Cheyenne war club during a little skirmish over some horses one night. Wheezing forever because hospitals and surgeons had not caught up with those fast moving frontiersmen who were winning their West.

The Old West had not been easily won. Those that survived the struggle carried many such marks. And Stuffy's right leg dragged a little, twice broken; once by a falling horse with a rustler's bullet in its lungs, once from an Apache .45 carbine. Old Stuffy, when the West was won, went on wheezing and limping, still in the cattle business; now rich, now poor, now lord of 10,000 acres, now hanging desperately to the last bit of green at the desert edge. Sometimes he had money; often enough he didn't. It didn't seem to make much difference anyway.

AT TIMES, as Reiker grew older and wheezier, all but housed up with his bad leg, Reed began impatiently to think of himself as the actual owner of the ranch. He gave his orders in a loud voice, he even bought and sold a bit, both horses and cattle, on his own initiative. He didn't bother to tell the Old Man about this. His pockets grew heavy with gold and then, one morning, Dow Reiker was no more. They found him upright in his great chair, the crippled leg on a cushioned stool before him, the lamp burning into the broad light of day, an old book of pencil marked poems in his big hands:

Behüt' dich Gott! es war' so schon
gewesen;
Behüt dich Gott! es not nicht sollen
sein.

Reed Howgan was sure now that his hour had come. All that he had been waiting and playing for was right in his hands. He tried, unsuccessfully, to hide his satisfaction and good humor, but there was a hollow note to the funeral voice he assumed for the occasion. Only to be followed, so soon, by that dark and bitter moment in the lawyer's office at Spring City, where Reed learned, for the very first, that Dow Reiker, mindful of every business detail, had made a will. *God be with thee, it would have been so beautiful.* The property went to a stranger, a schoolboy somewhere back East!

"What!" roared Reed hoarsely, as the droning words fell from the lawyer's lips. "After all I did for him!"

"What did you do?"

"Why, why," stammered Reed, "I made that ranch, I made that man!"

"He was a man," said someone hoarsely, "before ever you knew him, Reed."

"The ranch, all the stock, everything," groaned Reed. "All to a stranger, to a boy back East in school!"

"It is his will," said the lawyer, "and the law."

"It is the way Dow wanted it to go," said another.

Under his hissing breath, thick lips muttering, Reed Howgan cursed the very memory of Dow Reiker, cursed the law—cursed his luck—scarce hearing what was said.

"You're to stay on and manage things just as you have been doing," said the lawyer. "You are to take charge of things up there until this boy comes of age and decides what he wants to do with the property."

"I know what he can do with it," roared Reed. "He can go to hell!"

But then, later, cooling outwardly, Reed's scheming brain began to suggest ways and means whereby he could take what he considered rightfully belonged to him, regardless of title. There were ways, as he knew, whereby he might obtain this coveted title.

"Who, who is this brat, anyway?" he demanded savagely.

All that Reed could find out, picking up a word here and there among the dead man's friends, was that way back in 'Sixty-one, Dow Reiker, young and fearless, had jumped on the boot of the Albany stage and stolen a ride in to the capitol where Major Creel was enlisting a company of sharpshooters. Two years later Dow was officially killed at Chancellorsville. But, being a farm grown New Yorker, he proved mighty hard to finish. Dow lay for a long time unidentified in a Southern hospital until he was strong enough to be transferred to a Confederate prison. Then, as was to be expected, he dug out and escaped. When he got home his best girl had married the other fellow.

Dow faced the west and apparently all was forgotten years ago. But there were those who remembered that the man never looked at another woman. He spent most of his time where there weren't any women! Not until Dow was gone, and the will read, did anyone dream that this old romance had survived through all those years, long after all were dead but the grandson of his former sweetheart.

Dow left his property to Dorwin Powell. Judging from the meager returns, the few dollars, that found their way back East at ever increasing intervals, it wasn't much of a ranch. But now the owner of the Bar R was twenty-one. The old lawyer's guardianship was at an end. Tomorrow Dorwin Powell was coming, for the first time, to look at his ranch, to decide what he was going to do with it. Reed Howgan, ugly and a bit afraid, was determined that this should be nothing more than a visit, and a short one at that.

When Allen Tingue, chuckling over the fun he would have with this Eastern greenie, jingled out of the room on his high heels, Reed bellowed for the cookie.

"Punk," greeted Reed when the man stood before him, "we're expecting company."

Punk, because of his bread. Two little dark eyes in a huge dark face blinked by way of answer. Punk used few words. A drop or two of red or yellow blood, Reed never could determine which, in the fellow somewhere back along the line. A short, thickset body, round and bulky, a bit paunchy; a round and swarthy face, almost devoid of hair; dark animal eyes. He understood Reed to mean that extra grub and better cooking would be required for visitors. He was a good cook and there was plenty in the storeroom.

"The young fellow who thinks he owns this ranch is coming tomorrow."

A slow and deliberate nod of the heavy round head before him.

"He'll expect to eat," grinned Reed. "Do your worst!"

This brought words.

"If my cooking isn't good enough for him——"

"Listen," interrupted Reed, "you don't understand, Punk. We've got to make him damned sick of this place. Rotten grub will help."

The moon face broke into a smile of understanding. He had thought Reed was making fun of him, but his own fat and oily body, as well as the roundness of Reed's own middle, proved him a good cook.

"Beginning tomorrow night," explained Reed, "you cook mighty little and you cook it poor. Give him mostly beans—not too well done. A man can hate beans the worst."

Punk nodded that he understood. A crafty brain behind that swart face, Punk knew what was going on. Short rations would not bother him any. He ate in the kitchen and carried the storeroom key in his own pocket.

"Iron rations three times a day while he's here," finished Reed. "After he's gone we'll make up for it. We can afford to go hungry for a few days."

"You can," Punk said significantly.

"Haven't I always played fair with you boys?" demanded Reed, impatiently. "Haven't you always got your share?"

Reed, knowing that he had not always played fair, jumped up and stamped outdoors to the near-by bunkhouse to find Steve Mabie.

"You make outdoors around this ranchhouse look like hell," he ordered just as soon as he explained who was coming.

"You bet," answered Steve.

"I want him to see nothing but sand——"

"We'll fill his eye!" promised Steve.

"To smell nothing but horses."

"He'll need cotton in his nose."

"And to hear nothing but the lowing of hungry and thirsty cows."

"That," grinned Steve, "is th' lonesomest and th' saddest music in th' world."

CHAPTER III

EAST COMES WEST

IT IS fact that Dorwin Powell never had heard of Dow Reiker. Not until he went through his grandmother's belongings did he fully understand how he came to inherit this ranch in the Southwest. For quite a few years thereafter the only material thing about this Western property was a letter every now and then from a lawyer in Spring City. He read long reports: taxes, interest, Iowa feeders, herd losses. Evidently it wasn't a paying proposition.

When, with some difficulty, Dorwin located about where it was on a big map, this, too, was not encouraging. It was away from any railroad; it was close to a long range of low mountains. On one side was a large area of little black dots which indicated desert wasteland. Streams, he saw, were few and far between and had a peculiar way of beginning in the mountains and petering out somewhere down below. They never got anywhere. There wasn't a solitary thing about the place to appeal to a bookish young lad who loved the green forests, the silvery lakes and broad streams of the Northeast.

The new owner, now come to man's estate, did not even know there was such a man on the place as Reed Howgan. All his connection with the property had been through his lawyer at Spring City. And he did not know, and would not have believed it had he been told, that there were left in the whole West such men as Allen Tingue, Steve Mabie, Corn Willet, Indian John, Step-and-a-Half. . . .

"The Old West has gone," Dorwin told some of his friends when they became too enthusiastic over his coming journey. "All that popular fiction stuff is historical."

"But, you own a cattle ranch."

"Sure—one of the last."

"And there must be cowboys and horses——"

"More probably hired men and flivvers," laughed Dorwin.

So he came on West, comfortably in a chair car, reading a good book—something about emigrant Nordics who had conquered the plains. He ate with great satisfaction, sumptuously and well, in the dining car, little knowing that he soon must come down to beans. The fast overland train whirled him through great fields of corn and wheat, past farmsteads, villages, through small cities.

But, being an imaginative youth, Dorwin saw instead in his mind's eye, from the car window, the rolling plains peopled with picturesque frontiersmen, leather clad, riding on with the sun, rifles on their lean arms; great white caravans of covered wagons, hauled by cattle, winding slowly westward; great herds of longhorn steers being herded northward to the railroad. And this city and that, as his train whirled westward, he remembered had been but yesterday a frontier village, echoing midnight pistol shots, dead men in the dusty streets . . . All, all gone. Corn and alfalfa; paved streets and hard roads; fences, fences; automobiles. One whole day he never saw a horse. Dorwin sighed with regret.

"I'll look things over out there," he told himself. "I'll take a look-see at my property out there. I can stand it a few days. Maybe I can dispose of it for something."

Spring City was but a city in name. Actually it was a small village. A few stores and shops, one-story dwellings hovering about a crossroads and a railroad station. But, because of its location, there was more business than the size of the place indicated. Here, too, came the Eastern tourists in flocks to journey up into the Navajo reservation to the north. And southward began the Spanish possession, reminiscent of the glorious days when New Spain included most of the West.

Dorwin Powell, dropping lightly from the train vestibule, was inconspicuous among half a hundred similar travelers, dressed much the same, all of them shaven, well groomed. Dark he was, his hair glistening black, his eyes large and softly brown. A little above medium height, a bit thin now and yet well trained, a typical Easterner of the large cities, with all an urban resident's love for nature and outdoors. He wore a light tweed suit, plus-fours, checkered stockings and a new Panama hat.

Allen Tingue, standing there on the station platform, a twinkle of eager anticipation in his pale blue eyes, could only gulp and whirl his head as though it were on a swivel, before so many young men looking all alike. He didn't know which one to approach; he was timid about accosting any of them. Reed had no business sending him to meet a young feller he'd never seen before. Ought to have had a photograph anyway.

And Dorwin Powell, having wired for someone to meet him, was equally puzzled. When he saw Allen he sniffed and turned aside—another roughneck masquerading in cowboy clothes to sell tourists something. He looked behind the little station, half expecting to see a big closed car standing there waiting for him, a bit shocked as well as disappointed, to find nothing but a rusty old flivver panting noisily in the hot sun. He saw a middle aged man in overalls and a dusty cap, looking like a hired man ought to look, but who, as a matter of fact, was the station agent. Surely this was his man. Dorwin spoke to him.

"No stranger, I guess not," the man said, loud enough for everyone to hear. "I'm lookin' for a handsome young lady an' you won't do."

Everybody laughed and Dorwin flushed, a bit angry.

"I'm looking for someone to meet me from the Bar R Ranch," he began.

Allen's Adam's apple slid hastily up and down. He looked and gasped, caught a noisy explosion of laughter just in time, and surged forward.

"I'm th' man," said he, beaming, smiling, all aquiver with supressed laughter. *"Mirad seis harto sagaz!"*

All of which was unintelligible to Dorwin, but not to the station loungers in that bilingual town. They roared. Dorwin knew by Allen's eyes that he was making fun of his sport clothes. Surely the honors in that respect were even, thought Dorwin, paying him back in kind.

"Oh," said he, "so you are from the ranch."

"I be," chuckled Allen.

"And why, may I ask, are you wearing all this cowboy make-up?"

"It's th' law," grinned Allen. "If it wasn't fer th' law nobody'd wear any clothes a-tall out here in th' hot sand country!"

This got another laugh.

"Are you laughing at me?" demanded Dorwin.

"Not on your life," said Allen. "I jest happened t' think o' somethin' funny I heer'd last winter!"

"It's quite the proper thing now back East," said Dorwin quietly, "for employers to do all they can to amuse and entertain their help."

Allen, unable to coherently speak, waved a long arm toward the waiting flivver.

"In that?" asked Dorwin seriously.

"Th' elephunts are all busy this mornin'," giggled Allen, "gettin' out ties fer th' railroad. Th' camels hadn't been milked yet when I left, so I guess you'll have t' ride in th' little ol' oil can."

"I'll see about my baggage."

"Look quick," advised Allen, "an' if it's more'n another handkerchief you better have it mailed."

THERE was a little truck body behind the little car, but this was already piled full of things when the man in overalls wheeled up a truckload of Dorwin's things.

"There's some terrible mistake here," cried Allen at sight of all this.

The station agent gave him a wink and a snigger as he began to toss bags and things into Allen's arms.

"Are you quite sure," glared Allen to Dorwin, "that you have brung along sufficient habiliaments t' be respectable in this here desert?"

"If I haven't," said Dorwin, a bit hastily, "I will send for them."

"I ain't so damn sure," panted Allen from the top of his load where he was trying to fasten everything securely with a double diamond hitch, "that we'll get this load through Crooked Cañon. That place ain't none too wide."

"About how far is it to the ranch?" asked Dorwin.

"Two springs, three tires an' a barrel o' gas."

"Can't you reduce that to miles?"

"It ain't never been done yet," grinned Allen, whirling the crank. "Some say it's a hundred miles, an' some say it ain't but ninety-eight. But, as fer me, I hold if that crooked trail was once straightened out an' leveled down it would reach from here t' Denver."

"I don't suppose it makes any difference how far it is."

"Not th' slightest when you've got t' go," agreed Allen.

"Well," said Dorwin, "I'm thankful I don't have to go but this once."

At last, as though fully wound up, the car roared in response to Allen's spinning and they climbed aboard. Allen, looking down at the pedals, saw again Dorwin's plus-fours and checkered socks. He nearly exploded—boy's pants and woman's stockings! He made strange throaty sounds and his Adam's apple did a lively dance up and down his long corded neck. Now they were rattling and bouncing over the dry, sun baked mesa.

"Why — " *bang!* " — don't you — " *crash!* "make —" *whoom!* "— a road?" yelled Dorwin in the driver's ear.

A hairy, dusty ear, belonging to Allen Tingue, who, wrestling with the little car, at times seemed to have the better of it. Allen nonchalantly took his eyes off the ground, just as they were nosediving into a dry coulée, spat out of the broken windshield and gazed at his passenger with pity.

"What do we want t' go an' build a road fer?" he shouted back, answering the first question with another.

"Why," Dorwin told him, as the car snorted up the opposite bank, "to drive this car on, of course."

"This here car," boomed Allen proudly, "can go anywhere a road can."

He proceeded instantly to prove it by climbing up the steep side of the mesa, dodging boulders, leaping up rocky steps, all but tipping over while slanting up a slide of loose shale.

"This here car," shouted Allen, "will go anywhere I ask it to."

"Ask it to go a little slower," pleaded Dorwin.

"But she's meaner'n hell if she can't travel at her own gait," said Allen. "Jest like some horses!"

Allen knew a lot about horses, even if his fingers were a bit greasy from the flivver. He smelled strongly of horses for all his gasoline driving.

"It's a mighty crooked road," commented Dorwin.

"You'll find a lot o' crooked trails out here. Ho, ho, ho," laughed Allen. "I'll say you will!"

A tall man, this Allen, spare with every drop of moisture burned right out of him by the desert sun. Dark as an Arab, with a drooping red mustache and a face full of stubby beard that was shaven only Sunday mornings.

"This's been one hell of a year," shouted Allen.

"I suppose so," said Dorwin, as the car plowed through the soft sand. "It looks dry."

"Dry!" exclaimed Allen. "It's been dryer'n a woodpecker's upper lip all summer. Even th' little gray lizards are frying right down in their own grease. Kept us on th' jump, too, hustlin' th' stock here an' there for a bite t' eat an' a drop o' stinkin' water."

"I suppose you've had to feed."

"Feed!" exploding like a charge of gas in the muffler. "Feed 'em what?"

"Alfalfa, corn, hay——"

"Blister my breeches," laughed Allen, "if you ain't rich!"

"A long ways from being rich,"—answered Dorwin truthfully.

This would give Allen something to tell in the bunkhouse that night. He just couldn't keep his face straight. He stole a covered glance at his passenger out of the corner of his little blue eyes.

Dorwin Powell was bouncing around on the worn seat beside him. An Eastern greenie if ever there was one, in short pants and woman's stockings! Allen near choked with half suppressed laughter, never having seen golf clothes before. A straw hat that had been white when they started but was now the color of dust. A slenderly built young fellow, looking soft as soft, the well fitting gray golf suit hiding and disguising his athletic and well trained body. "Damned if he wasn't perfumed!" thought Allen, snuffing at scented talcum—Allen in his shirt sleeves, not a clean shirt either, smelling of sweat and horse. Lily white hands, noted Allen, soft as a baby's, never done a day's work probably, never been real dirty—Allen's paws were grimy, calloused, the black rimmed nails worn and torn.

"Jest wait," thought Allen, "till I get this pilgrim t' th' ranch. It'll be better'n a circus t' th' boys!"

Actually he was afraid, for the first time, that something might happen to the little car to delay his dramatic arrival there. In his eagerness to see their eyes pop he drove over the rough trail faster than ever before, somewhat to the risk of his passenger's neck. Around a bend, skirting a low mesa, where the trail was just wide enough for his load, Allen jammed on the brakes and nearly sent Dorwin crashing through the windshield.

"Whoa!" bellowed Allen, more used to horses. "Whoa there!"

Right before them in the dusty trail was a ragamuffin old man, bent and shrunken, the skin of his face and neck weathered to reptilian leather. He stood there waving his thin arms, his unshaven jaw wagging. But they could not hear what he was saying until the engine stalled.

". . . You dadgasted heap o' ol' junk—you ambulatin' pile o' rusty scrapiron. What d'you mean by runnin' slapbang inter me an' Balaam fer?"

"Now, now, Sammy," soothed Allen, enjoying the old man's scare.

"Balaam," evidently, referred to a jack, hardly more than four small black hoofs and two large cocked ears to testify that anything lived beneath that load.

"You roamin' b'iler factory you—runnin' wild down th' trails. One more o' them damn things an' Sammy gets t' hell out o' this country fer good!"

"Now, now, Sammy," Allen could not resist the temptation to have a little fun with the old desert rat, "ain't you jest about t' discover thet big bonanza, right on th' p'int o' finding th' mother lode herself?"

"If it wasn't fer that I wouldn't be here now," screeched the old man. "I'd be somewhere so fur away I couldn't hear that contraption clatterin' along—if there is any such place!"

"You get somewhere right now and lively," roared Allen, "a-fore I shove you out o' my way."

"You shove me jest oncet——"

"I'll run right over you, jack and all," he cried, pretending to start toward him down the grade.

"Try it," screamed the old man. "Jest try it, this oncet. There's half a case o' dynamite in that load!"

Allen's foot crashed down on the brake.

It was a quarter of a mile before the trail widened sufficiently for them to pass and for every foot of the way the old man raved at Allen's hazing. Finally, in parting, he hurled after them one final threat.

"If ever I get th' chanct," he shrilled, "I'll pay ye back with intrust!"

Long after the old man had vanished in their dust Allen laughed and giggled over this happy diversion in their journey. The land before them seemed to raise in giant steps, one plateau a bit higher than the other, always climbing up, and before them, still a long way off, the varicolored mountains, fire colored, stained with strange minerals.

"Look," cried Dorwin, as a range of painted mountains swung up into view. "Beautiful!"

"They're always like that," said Allen. "Lookin' hot an' dry."

"Way off there in the west," cried Dorwin, "there's snow!"

"Yea, fifty miles away and two straight up in the air!"

"It's wonderful——"

"It's no place for a white man," answered Allen above the roar of low gear.

"But you live here!"

"Oh, I've got to," admitted Allen. "My job's here."

"You could get one somewhere else if you didn't like it."

"Oh, I could!" shouted Allen. "I guess you don't know, mister, what's happened t' th' cattle business here on th' ragged edge o' nowhere—they've got us crowded right back t' th' jumpin' off place."

"Who has?"

"Them sons-o'-guns!" Allen spat a stream of brown tobacco juice over the side of the lurching car. "Them dry farmers, homesteaders, sheepherders and dirty Spaniards."

"Chased?" began Dorwin, doubtfully. "What——"

More eloquent than any words his question was answered by a reverberating rifle shot, high and clear above the noisy engine exhaust.

CHAPTER IV

FIRST BLOOD

A RIFLE shot and a distant yell. Then the drumlike roll of two repeating rifles firing as fast as the mechanism would permit.

"Mex!" yelled Allen. "Get down!"

He looked to see Dorwin slump down beneath the cowl, fully expecting to see a badly frightened Eastern greenie groveling on the heaving car floor. But nothing like this happened.

At the second shot Dorwin jerked his head around so quickly that he lost his straw hat. Something about that roll of rifle fire reminded him of other days. The new Panama went sailing away, whirling on ahead of them in the wind. He saw behind them, at no great distance, two well mounted men, riding fast in pursuit, yelling and shooting.

"It's them bloodthirsty Spaniards!" yelled Allen, giving her more gas.

"Don't get frightened," answered Dorwin.

Allen, assuming a scared look, nearly died of inward laughter as Dorwin continued.

"Be comforted by the knowledge that they are the two worst shots in the world."

"They may get us yet," said Allen.

"They may, unless you slow down a bit. The way this old car bounces around it may stray into the line of fire. I don't even hear their lead speaking."

"Let's hope this old teakettle holds together," groaned Allen in mock anguish. "If it lays down we'll be shot in cold blood."

"Not in this hot climate," corrected Dorwin. "Why should anyone shoot at us?" he demanded.

The old car was running a bit smoother just now.

"Mex—sheepmen," Allen went on with his fiction. "It's the old feud—look out!" The flivver took a shallow coulée on high. "They aim t' get us if they can."

"Then they've got to aim better than they have," snapped Dorwin, hearing no bullets.

Just wait, thought Allen, until he told the boys of this.

"Have you got a gun?" asked Dorwin.

Reed was prepared for this very thing. Allen nearly choked when he answered. Oh, just wait! Fell right into his trap.

"Under th' seat," he shouted.

The seat cushion was divided. Dorwin raised it up, thrust in his hand and brought out a gun—but such a gun! It was an old cap-and-ball "pepper box"—six little barrels all joined together.

"This gun is all right," said Dorwin, hefting it, "providing they get near enough so I can throw it."

"It's th' very gun," Allen's lips were wet, his lips twitched, "I always use."

"No wonder they live to annoy you." Dorwin was aroused now. "I've got a little old firelock here——"

Allen gave his whole attention to the car. He imagined this Easterner searching his traveling bag for a little .22 caliber pocket gun.

"Give it t' 'em!" said he.

"Slow up—give me a crack at them!"

A funny noise escaped Allen's clenched lips. He near gave the whole show away. Allen Tingue considered this attack nothing but a stroke of genius, carefully thought out and executed all by himself. It was one of the best jokes, he thought, ever played upon an Eastern greenie—a real Wild West battle between warring Mexican sheepmen and the cowboys! If Reed wanted this young man scared he was getting it now. With the aid of a couple Mexican hats Allen had disguised two of his own riders for the big scare with instructions to shoot plenty but aim high and wide.

"Hang on fer your life," yelled Allen as they plunged down the grade. He had to give his whole attention to the car just then and the *pop-pop-pop!* he heard, Allen attributed to the exhaust exploding in the muffler.

"There," it was Dorwin yelling in his right ear. "I got one of the——"

"Good Lord!" gasped Allen, all the laughter dropping out of him, the little car running away unguided down the hill. "If you ain't gone an' shot one o' them!"

Dorwin, kneeling on the seat, fired again at the other rider who hadn't noticed that his companion was hurt.

"And I'll get th' other in half a minute if he keeps on."

Allen groaned.

"Slow up, slow up!" Dorwin had a high-power rifle in his hand, dragged out of one of his bags on the load behind him. "Slow up and I'll get him."

Instead Allen gave her all the gas there was, and going downhill too. Not for a mile or two could anyone speak loud enough to be heard. On the next grade, Allen stole a hasty glance back and saw that the pursuit was ended.

"Lord God," he groaned, "I hope you ain't hurt him bad."

"Shooting at us, wasn't he?" demanded Dorwin, now thoroughly aroused.

"It, it—" Allen gulped. "It ain't so serious as it looks—jest kind o' pastime."

"You mean to say this occurs often?" demanded Dorwin.

" 'Bout every trip," said Allen, his love for exaggeration and humor overcoming everything else. "Those Spaniards have been shootin' at us fer years an' years——"

"And never hit anybody?"

"O' course they do! Wasn't Bill Hotalin' shot in th' leg back in '97?"

"I'll give them a few lessons in shooting——"

"I guess you *have*," sighed Allen.

"One of them will quit this form of exercise and amusement for a few days anyway."

"Seems t' me," said Allen, "you take it mighty cool."

"Oh," said Dorwin, lighting a cigaret, "I've been shot at lot's of times."

"You have! Where?"

"In France," smiled Dorwin in memory of those days.

"Ho!" cried Allen. "So you learned to shoot like that over there practicin' on th' heinies."

"Oh, I learned to shoot long before that," explained Dorwin. "I've always hunted grouse and quail over good dogs. And moose and deer in Eastern forests where you have to shoot quickly and accurately or not at all."

"Whew!" from Allen. "An' I was so sure you couldn't hit a barn if you was inside it."

The day was dying in a blaze of glory when they arrived at the ranch-house. Reed Howgan, hearing the car rattling down the mountain trail, stood before the ranch-house to welcome his employer. Shadows laid their kindly fingers on the rough desert land, hiding the worst of it. Burning heat died out of the air as the cooling evening breeze began to play. Reflected and refracted from the roseate and colorful banners of the sky, the higher ranges caught and held the burning gold, shimmering crimson and delicate pinks; while in the shadows deep lavenders and rich purples were held in luxurious magnificence. A painted world, a world of high colored beauty, as though the great sun god who had done this terrible thing to the earth now strove to cover up the damage with a lavish display of artificial coloring.

The ranch-house, a rambling structure of logs, a single-story affair, lay in heavy shadow, and the yellow of oil lamps brightened up the windows and the open doorway behind Reed Howgan standing out to meet his guest.

"Welcome to the Bar R," called Reed as the flivver came banging to its final stop and stood there hissing and boiling.

"Hello," answered Dorwin as he stepped out, cramped and stiff from his long ride.

In the deeper shadow of the bunkhouse stood half a dozen dark figures, dimly visible in that uncertain evening light, but Dorwin knew that men were there for he could hear their half suppressed laughter and smothered exclamations as he walked in the streaming lamplight toward the open doorway, making a path of gold to his ranch, his home.

"Sufferin' polecats!" exploded a low nasal voice. Low, hoarse laughter came from the darkness behind them. "Does you all see what I see?"

"I see mommie's little Willie boy!"

"I see high water pants!"

A rumble of unchecked laughter. If any of them knew that Dorwin heard, they certainly did not care.

CHAPTER V

WELCOME HOME!

THIS would be easier than he thought! A great feeling of relief came over Reed, in the streaming lamplight, when he saw the owner of the Bar R for the first time. As usual, prompted by a guilty conscience, with so many things to hide, he had been worrying over nothing. This was no more than an Eastern parlor boy, taking his exercise on the tennis courts and helping old ladies with their afternoon teas. Anger melted out of him, the harsh note left his anxious voice, a little laughing purr of satisfaction and pleasure crept into his false welcome.

"Come right in and make yourself to home," boomed Reed. Life was a game, the spirit of it was to win, to outwit the other fellow. He was not afraid now. "We rough it here—little to do with and less time to do it. You'll have to get hard."

"Oh, thanks," said Dorwin, "I have lived hard before."

"Ho, ho, ho," laughed Reed, thinking of afternoon picnics in the park. "You stay here long enough and we'll toughen you up, hey, Allen?"

"I'll tell th' West!" gurgled Allen.

As he walked into the ranch-house Dorwin's spirits sank for the first time. He was prepared for the desert, for the mountains with their lack of green, for the long, rough ride in, but he had thought that at his journey's end would be a comfortable home. The exterior of the large ranch-house looked inviting in the dusk; but once inside he found it dirty, unkept, smelly, disorderly, uninviting.

"Make yourself comfortable in th' guest room," Reed indicated a dark recess with a wave of his big hand. "I asked one of the boys to slick it up a bit, but I guess he isn't much of a chambermaid."

"As a housekeeper," said Dorwin, the lamp revealing his room, "he's probably a good cowhand!"

Reed laughed, not so much at this reply as at Dorwin's evident reaction to the disorderly interior. This was as he had planned. For, instead of cleaning and putting the ranch-house in order for this first visit of the owner, Reed had spent hours making it uninviting, and yet without overdoing it so as to reflect upon himself. With studied intent he planned to make Dorwin sick of it, to give the impression that they were but busy men with no time nor talent for housework.

"I tried to find a woman to come over here and clean up this place," lied Reed, "but there ain't any within a hundred miles."

Dust lay thick upon the rough floor; worn and bald cowskins; ashes a foot deep in the fireplace, sifting out over everything; the table a catch-all for papers, quirts, spurs, guns, cleaning rods, and a hundred other things; smelly pipes and odorous cigar stubs; the whole place was eloquent of horse.

"One woman wouldn't have been enough," said Dorwin.

Reed's face darkened. Intentional or not, this was a slam at him.

"I am not the housekeeper," said he.

"Apparently there isn't any."

"You can have the job," he retorted. "If you're strong enough for that!"

With a few human touches, thought Dorwin, ignoring this as he went into the tiny bedroom, this would be a pleasant home. If he was to stay there he certainly would clean it up just once. The bed had been hewn out of pine logs, lashed together and laced with rawhide. There was no mattress, no pillows; just a few old army blankets. A packing box answered for dresser. When Allen had finished carrying in his things there was hardly room for him to stand.

Outdoors Reed asked Allen, in a low voice, how they had made out coming in.

"I gave him th' ride o' his young life," chuckled Allen. "I had a couple o' th' boys ride int' us up Black Mesa way, stagin' a regular holdup——"

"Good!" exclaimed Reed.

"Not so good!" corrected Allen. "That hombre is sure hard t' scare!"

"We only want to make him powerful sick of this place," explained the more subtle Reed.

Allen said no more. He did not tell Reed that Dorwin had shot one of the boys. Well enough to mention this when he knew for sure how serious it was. Maybe it was nothing after all.

Reed's final touch of genius was at the supper table. A pine table covered with red oilcloth, innumerable grease spots, countless brown rings from coffeecup bottoms. The plates were thick and heavy, chipped and nicked, the "tools," as Reed called them, were of plain steel, none too clean. Allen was there, helping Reed play the game, with Dorwin seated at the head of the table. He had eaten at many forest camps in the East, in the wilds of Canada; but nothing so primitive as this. There was sufficient food, but it was coarse and unappetizing. Army rations. Dorwin remembered such rations! He remembered beans. And how he hated beans! Coarse, soggy bread; beans; coffee black as ink, and muddy.

"We're mighty glad you've come," said Reed. "Help yourself to th' beans . . . Now you can see for yourself just how things are going out here."

"I see," said Dorwin, hungry enough even for beans.

"You'll get an eyeful," chuckled Allen significantly.

Which drew a dark look from Reed, as though he feared Allen lacked the wit to carry the thing through.

"The cattle business sure ain't any Sunday school picnic," went on Reed. "They've got us about crowded offen the earth."

"I'd like some milk, please," interrupted Dorwin, innocently enough, eyeing the black concoction in his cup.

"Awk!" snorted Allen, trying to disguise his laughter with hoarse choking noises.

"Milk!" cried Reed.

"A little cream fer th' gentleman's coffee, sir," sputtered Allen.

Dorwin was instantly conscious of some "break," but wasn't just sure what it could be.

"It's the rule here," said Reed, keeping his face straight, "if anybody wants milk for his coffee he's got to do the milking himself."

"I never milked a cow," said Dorwin.

"Nor anyone else out here," laughed Allen. "You can't take any milk away from any cow out here—not while she lives!"

"Thanks," smiled Dorwin. "I'll drink it black. I'm curious to know if it tastes as bad as it looks."

"Worse," exclaimed Allen. "But you'll get used t' it in a couple o' years!"

REED HOWGAN suffered from loss of appetite. He ate scarcely nothing at all. But Allen had been jouncing for hours in the little car and felt empty as a barrel. He ate. Dorwin, though hungry enough, was not yet reconciled to such rations. In a few days, he remembered, even poorly baked beans would taste good. They had before!

"You've come at the wrong time," explained Reed, "but we'll do the best we can to make it pleasant for you. A little later it will be cooler, we'll get some rain, but just now it's hell. We're busy trying to save the stock, hustling what's left from one pasture to another, one waterhole to the next. We haven't any time for housekeepin' and fancy work, for entertainment and company."

"Please don't bother with me," answered Dorwin. "I don't have to be entertained or amused."

"There's mighty little entertainment in this Western wilderness," said Reed, "and no amusement in the cattle business."

"Just so long as I'm outdoors—" began Dorwin.

"And outdoors isn't any good out here," warned Reed. "If the sun don't get you, the desert will, unless you know every trail."

"I expect to ride a lot," said Dorwin.

Reed looked at Allen, as much as to say, "He will—like hell!" Allen shut his left eye slowly.

"You'll have to be a bit careful where you ride," warned Reed.

"Oh, I'm not afraid of getting lost," Dorwin said confidently.

"It isn't altogether that," continued Reed, determined that Dorwin must not get far from the ranch-house. "There's always the Big Thirst."

"I will keep out of that," promised Dorwin.

"You better," added Allen.

"And to the south," added Reed, mindful of the attack Allen had staged on the way in, "those Spanish neighbors aren't any too friendly."

"Evidently not," agreed Dorwin.

Reed explained in considerable detail that somewhere to the south was a Spanish ranch and that those greasers were not to be trusted within rifle shot of any white man. There was some truth to this because, while no actual war raged between the two ranches and the two races, by agreement each kept strictly to his own territory. Once upon a time there had been actual shooting, but now the mountain range separated them and they avoided trouble. Reed elaborated on this danger without giving a hint of the real reason why he did not want Dorwin to ride that way. He was certain that if Dorwin strayed over there he would hear too much, even if he didn't see too much.

"Hossback ridin' out here can't truthfully be classified as a recreation," he explained.

"There ain't nothin' t' see," added Allen, "an' no place for t' go."

"But tourists come out here," interposed Dorwin.

"Only to the Navajo towns," explained Reed. "These northern Navajo haven't been tamed yet. They are not to be trusted."

After all, thought Reed, he was wasting words. It would be a simple matter to keep this stranger away from the places he did not want him to see. Allen and the boys would look after that. It wasn't the kind of country a stranger could wander around in alone. There wasn't the slightest bit of danger this greenie would ever get within gunshot of Hidden Valley.

Hidden Valley, Sunken River, Cañon Pond—only Reed and the boys knew of these places. A stranger couldn't find one of them in a month of Sundays! For the last few years Reed hadn't been selling much stock. To sell meant a division of the money, something to go back East to a stranger. But, so long as the cattle were somewhere in the hills, under his direction, there was more than a chance that he might sell them at his own profit. If he bought the ranch, if he drove them out over the High Trail, he could make a deal with a certain man and no one be the wiser. And he knew how to stop mouths with money. It fretted him to know that he must hold this hidden stock a few days longer, right now when the market was good, when everything was set to get them out; but there was no help for it. While Dorwin Powell was there he must be careful. And he would see to it that this visit was short.

"It's been just one thing after another," Reed was preparing Dorwin for another profitless season, to discourage him. "Hot winds and no rain. Longest drought we ever had in this country and Heaven knows we've had aplenty. The pasture's gone and most of the waterholes have dried up. The stock is dyin' in the hills——"

"I'm glad I came," smiled Dorwin, "while there is so much to do. I can help."

"You can what?" sneered Reed.

"Help."

"Why, you don't know a thing about th' cattle business!"

"I can learn," smiled Dorwin.

"It will take you a year just to learn the trails in this section of the country."

"I doubt it," laughed Dorwin, "but even if it does I shall be here——"

"A year?" Reed's voice was hoarse.

"Longer than that."

"About how long?" asked Reed, narrow eyed.

"Forever," smiled Dorwin.

"A man," Reed hastily covered, "would die of lonesomeness here in less'n a month."

"I have been homesick and lonesome before," said Dorwin, "and it didn't kill me."

"No!" roared Reed, determined that Dorwin must not stay.

"There really isn't much choice," explained Dorwin, "whether I die of lonesomeness and ennui, or what ails me."

"What ails you?" demanded Reed.

"Lungs," said Dorwin, smiling.

"You don't look sick."

He wondered. Had this fellow heard something after all? Was he just spying around, hoping to catch someone?

"Gassed," explained Dorwin, noting Reed's puzzled look. "Touch of chlorin. Keeps getting a bit worse. Doctor-man says I've got to stay out here where it's hot and dry until everything is healed up for good."

"Ha!" came hissing out like a cat's angry voice. "Ha!"

"And there are other reasons."

"Name them." Reed's voice was hard now.

"Financial. I had to give up my job. The ranch hadn't been paying of late—" Reed wished now that he had been more liberal. "I've just naturally come here, sick and broke—the only home I have, you know."

"It's your ranch," Reed admitted, "but it's hardly a home for anyone."

"I'll have to stay and make the best of it."

Reed gasped, stared threateningly, shoved his chair scrapingly back from the table, a thousand questions in his anxious eyes.

"You don't mean you aim to stay here—permanently?"

"As long as I live," Dorwin smiled wanly. "Which may not be so very long."

"No," gurgled Allen, who knew Reed of old, "it mayn't!"

CHAPTER VI

A SORRY JOKE

"I'LL BE damned!" The words sputtered from Reed's drawn lips like hot iron plunged into cold water "After all the years I've slaved here—now he comes, to stay!"

"Don't you worry none," comforted Allen. "He ain't goin' t' stay."

"He says he is!"

"Sayin' so don't make it so."

Countless stars burned bright overhead, the night sky seemed very near, and the inky outline of distant mountains traced a ragged line along the horizon. In the near-by bunkhouse a yellow oil lamp burned. Horses were stamping restlessly in the corral. Somewhere out in the darkness cattle moved restlessly, the strong scent of them rode the faint night breeze and the low rumble of their discontent shook the dusky air.

"An Eastern greenie—helpless as a baby," said Allen. "Why should we worry?"

"It makes me mad!"

"Jest a big joke," laughed Allen. "Only a great big joke. We'll have a lot o' fun with thet feller, let me tell ye. We'll make him sick o' this here place in no time a-tall."

"I wish I thought so!"

"You're always lookin' fer trouble—" began Allen.

"And I've found lots of it, too," interrupted Reed.

"Mommie's precious laddie boy," roared Allen. "Them clothes!"

"I hate his slicked down hair, I hate his fancy shirt, I hate his smile," rumbled Reed. "And I don't like his damned eyes!"

"I ain't never had such a good laugh," chuckled Allen.

"You may laugh on t'other side of your mouth before this thing is over," warned Reed.

"We're bound t' win, ain't we?"

"I'm not so sure!"

"We're dealin' th cards, aint we? I've heared it said no greenhorn ever won at a crooked game."

"You may also have heard," growled Reed, "that crooked games never pay!"

But Allen was too filled with laughter to pay any serious attention to this. Chuckling and giggling to himself, fairly bursting with all the funny things he had to tell the boys, he almost ran across the sandy yard to the bunkhouse. As he burst into the doorway his laughter was instantly silenced by what he saw there.

"You big——"

On the table a man was stretched, stark and nude, his face writhed in pain, white lips hurling this obscene greeting at his head. Steve Mabie was bending over him, his hands strangely red.

"W-what—?" stammered Allen.

The naked man tried to get up, but Steve thrust him back with red hands and a warning.

"What'd you give that damn greenhorn a gun fer?" demanded the twisting lips.

It was Corn Willet, more angry than injured.

"What'd you hand him a gun fer, anyway?" he cried.

"I gave him th' old pepper-box——"

"Pepper-box my eye," snapped Corn. "He damn near got me at three hundred yards!"

"He had a gun hid in his stuff——"

"A fine job you played on me!"

"It was an accident—" began Allen, really sorry.

"When you want t' stage another Wild West mellerdrammer you can get another actor," shouted Corn.

Fortunately he was not badly hurt. But he had a nasty cut in his side—an inch nearer and his right lung would have been punctured. It was only a question of getting the blood stopped. Steve was skilled in rough frontier surgery, often heroic, and was doing what he could. "I wish I had some cobwebs," said Steve.

"Tomorry mornin', bright an' early," cursed Corn, "jest as soon as it's light enough t' see, I'm goin' t' shoot that——"

"You're goin' t take a nice long rest fer a day or two," corrected Steve.

Allen did not stay to recite his humor—the sight of blood made him a little sick. He hurried outdoors again. Corn had had a narrow squeak—but these men were used to that. Reed had selected them with this one thing in mind; and they knew what was going on. Not one of them that could have ridden for anyone else. They were too well known. And yet Reed and Allen managed them. Good wages, opportunity to do much as they pleased, more or less partners in the mad venture—it was a job much to their liking. They lacked the courage and the brains to find easy money for themselves. But, they were willing to do any kind of dirty work if it paid the price, providing they could lay all the responsibility on someone else.

"Corn's laid up fer a few days," Allen explained to Reed.

"Your idea was all right," said Reed, "but you overplayed your hand."

"How'd I know he had a gun?"

"You ought to have kept your eye on him. We've got to play this careful. One bad break and it's all over."

"Corn won't squeal——"

"If any one of you give this thing away," said Reed hoarsely, "I'll drop him in his tracks!"

"You can kill me, Reed, any time you want t'," answered Allen truthfully. "I ain't no professional gunman like you be. But let me tell yo', *hombrecito,* you won't live long t' enjoy your triumph!"

"There ain't any law out here——"

"Thar's bandit law, Reed," smiled Allen. "Gun law. We know you, Reed. We know jest how handy you be with them fireirons o' your'n. We've all agreed that if you let down one o' us we'll get you frum behind, er anyway, without warnin' er remorse."

"We're all in on this together—" muttered Reed, weakening.

"O' course we be, Reed, an' we'd all like t' come out together!"

They stood there in the dark, talking in low tones, making their plans. While, wide eyed in his rude bunk, Dorwin Powell puzzled over so many things, new and strange. He thought of the long journey in and tried to find a reason why, in this day and age, they should be attacked by two strange riders. Beyond a doubt they had been Mexicans; he could see their tall hats. But why? Tired and exhausted, his nerves keyed up, his mind wandered from one thing to another, now here, now there, now back East in the busy city he had called home.

Home! This was home. He almost laughed aloud. This—home? Absurd!

The night air was made more desolate and lonely than any silence by the moaning and bawling of hungry and thirsty stock, by the mournful voices of tiny owls, by the distant howl of wolves. Dorwin felt the first symptoms of homesickness. He sensed something amiss, an unexplainable, night haunting threat of something dire and dread.

"A stranger," he sighed, "in a strange land."

CHAPTER VII

MEET THE BOYS!

STANDING there alone, in the first effulgent glow of red morning light, Dorwin Powell could see that, once upon a time, someone had loved this place.

With half an eye he could discern, also, that Reed Howgan and the other hands now hated it.

But Dow Reiker—he certainly must have loved it. There was still some evidence of this fact. The young man, looking about him upon desolation and untidiness, wondered how anyone, even a hired man, could live there for long without some yearning for a little beauty and comfort. Here was nothing but dirt and makeshifts. The ranch-house, staunchly built of logs and well planned, unkept and unrepaired, stood on a broad bench of land, sloping away to a dry ravine, with a yellow cliff behind it, a rocky wall streaked with some bright, reddish, metallic substance that glistened brightly in the sun. About it nothing but dirt, sand, stones, litter from horses and stock, rusty tins.

Yet there was ocular evidence that Dow

had loved it as a home, that he had tried to make it inviting and comfortable. There was the ruin of a stone wall that once had enclosed the whole place with an ample yard. Here and there the stumps of trees, once carefully planted and tenderly nourished, ruthlessly cut down for firewood as being the handiest to get. Not a shrub was left standing about the place, not a green thing. He could see the ruins of a well, or a tank, where once there was water to irrigate this garden. He could well imagine it as a pleasant place, with green grass, shady trees, flowers. But Reed did not care for those things. And now the desert had taken it back again. Sand and more sand, hot and sterile.

Evidently Dow had carefully selected the site for his home. Before it, stretched one of the finest views on the range; but even this was disfigured and defiled by a crazy structure of small logs, roofed with ragged reeds held in place with poles and stones. It was not a barn, nor yet a corral, but a sort of cross between the two, wherein the horses necessary about the place found shade in summer and shelter in winter, and where some wild hay could be stored. Just behind the house ran a barbed wire fence along which restless cattle plodded in their endless search for an exit.

"Everything possible has been done to make a man hate this place," thought Dorwin. "But, but—if ever this ranch gets to paying again I will fix it up as it should be!"

In his mind the cobhouse of a barn was pulled down, the stone wall ran straight and true again, shutting out the desert, and behind it grass grew and trees rustled pleasantly in the breeze. Not just a log hut broiling in the sun, but home!

His dark eyes fell upon the cattle, thin and worn, dust covered, heads drooping, searching the fence. He imagined that they suffered. He could not know that they were bawling mostly because they were shut up in a strange place.

"I can't stand that!"

Dorwin went straight to the gate and swung it open. A lead cow trotted through. With a rush the rest of them took it on the jump. Reed, hearing this noise, came to the doorway, disheveled from restless sleep.

"Hey," he yelled, "what are you doing out there?"

"I am letting this stock out," replied Dorwin.

"What did you do that for?" he demanded angrily.

"Because they were suffering—" began Dorwin.

"Don't you ever do that again," shouted Reed, who always got up ugly. "Them cows——"

"In case I should take a sudden notion to open a gate on my own ranch," interrupted Dorwin, his voice low and even and yet ringing with authority, "why, I shall do it—and let the sky fall!"

"You just make us trouble," argued Reed, who could not explain why the stock was there. "God knows where they'll go now!"

"I hope they'll go where there is water and something to eat."

"Cows," said Reed, "can't travel that far."

To avoid any further questions and explanations he turned and went back indoors. But their voices had wakened Allen who hurriedly dressed, by the simple procedure of pulling on his boots and taking a fresh chew.

"You're up before breakfast," he greeted Dorwin pleasantly enough.

"I couldn't stand those cows!"

"They sing a mighty mournful song in a powerful sad voice," agreed Allen.

"What did you have them shut up here for?" asked Dorwin.

"Why—why," Allen gulped and groped for an answer, "we was goin' t' drive 'em over on another pasture."

"I've saved you the trouble," smiled Dorwin. "They're halfway there right now."

"Even a cow can't stand it here—" began Allen.

"It looks as though someone tried to make it pleasant once."

"Old Man Reiker sure wasted a sight o' money on this place," explained Allen. "Why, he even brought water down in a lead pipe jest t' water his posy beds!"

"Why not?"

"We're here t' make money, that's why. We ain't got time fer sich flummy diddles."

"We'll find time," promised Dorwin.

"All right, all right," chuckled Allen. "Come over t' th' bunkhouse an' meet your future gardeners an' posy experts."

ALLEN was crazy to show this young Eastern dude to the boys. He just couldn't wait. He all but ran on his crooked legs to the bunkhouse door.

"Tumble out, you all," he shouted. "Come an' meet th' big boss."

They did not come out. Allen thrust the door open and instead Dorwin went inside.

"Hello," he greeted.

Corn Willet sat there in a chair, his shirt on. No one would know he was hurt. He glared at Dorwin with shy eyes. But the rest, just cleaning up for breakfast, taking their cue from Allen, came forward somewhat timidly with a weak handshake and a muttered "Howd'y." Dorwin stayed but a minute—he could see that the men were embarrassed, diffident and self-conscious before a stranger and the owner of the ranch. With a pleasant word or two he went out, not noticing that, as he went through the door, Injun John was making a horrible grimace behind his back.

"Doggone my cats," sniggered Steve, "if I ever seed anything jest like that a-fore!"

There were other remarks, not so nice—which Dorwin could not hear—and a deal of laughter.

"Tough hombres," explained Allen when they were outdoors again. "Humbliest lot o' punchers west o' th' big river, but hard riders, every son-of-a-gun. Mighty nice an' well behaved lads, too," he laughed. "Right honorable men, with th' boss's interest always at heart."

Dorwin understood that Allen was spreading it on a bit thick, knowing the man's weakness for exaggeration, and he could see that these men were rough. They certainly were not exactly the kind of cowboys he had expected to meet, not the carefree, happy-go-lucky, young men of the cattle country he had read about so much. Neither did they wear the colorful clothing of the picturesque West. Charley Bell, for instance, was a wizened and prematurely old young man, in worn overalls and a collarless shirt, his only concession to Western dress being half boots and a wide brimmed, sunburned hat. His gun and belt lay on his bunk.

Step-and-a-Half, to give him his common name, who could ride like a centaur but hobbled about on a short leg, was just a frecklefaced big kid, ignorant and superstitious. With a few drinks he became quarrelsome and ugly. Steve Mabie was long of body and shifty of eye—small gray eyes very close together beside a hawk nose. Corn Willet, keeping his chair, big and coarse, rough and ready, unshaven, tobacco stained, in a dangerous mood now with the pain of his side. And Injun John, with little Indian in him and that all bad.

They all went riding away in a cloud of dust, laughing and joking, led by Allen, leaving Dorwin practically alone in that lonesome place. Reed kept to his work table, apparently busy with ranch details, making no effort to be friendly or to entertain his guest. For an hour or two Dorwin busied himself with packing away his things. Another long day, poor food; alone. It was hot and desolate and lonely. There wasn't even a dog to make friends with, to have for company.

"I'd quit," Dorwin told himself. "I'd get out of here. It really isn't a fit place to die in—only—"

Only— He could not explain this hesitancy, this doubt. But something held him. It was *his* ranch, it should be *his* home—he would *not* be driven away. There certainly was something antagonistic in the very air. . . .

"I'll stick," he gritted his teeth. "I'll fight it out!"

That indescribable something, that inner urge of subconscious self, that unknown sense, which gamblers call a "hunch," warned him to be careful, to be prepared. In his little room, behind the cowskin curtain, he took from one of his bags a short barreled, high-powered, automatic pistol of foreign make. It was the last word in pocket guns. An unusual and rather clumsy looking weapon, but the merest flick of a finger would throw off the safety and speed a steady stream of steel bullets in one long rolling staccato of sound, until the magazine was empty.

"I'll play safe," said he. "No one will know that I am armed."

With needle and thread from a traveling case Dorwin sewed this gun in his right coat pocket so that it would be very ready to his hand, held flat and horizontal, close by his side like a friend in need, muzzle first, pointed forward about the height of a man's middle.

CHAPTER VIII

A BAD HORSE

CLOTHES, it has been well said, do not make the man. And a golf suit, a Panama hat, broadcloth hirt and linen underwear do not make a reenie, a softie, even though, in certain ections of the West, they may make a oung man look like one.

Dorwin Powell could ride.

Absurd as it may seem to native Westrners, a man can ride a horse, and ride rell, without a stock saddle. Horses were idden before the high pommel was inented by the Moors and brought to New pain by Spanish haciendadoes. Dorwin ould ride. He preferred the English ridng saddle, because it was lighter, and he ad ridden many a mile on the saddle redited to a certain U. S. Army officer. ut he could ride, saddle or no saddle. is father's people were Virginians and oved their horses. His boyhood pet was dusky Shetland as gentle as a dog. Alays he had ridden, even in the cities, here saddle horses were available for ire. He came West with the idea that he ould do a lot of riding.

The first day convinced him that this as a hard life, but Dorwin had lived hard efore, in mountain camps, on long canoe ourneys, far hunting trips. And over here in France the front line certainly as no picnic! He had been brought up o shoot. His early training had been uail hunting over good dogs, which will each anyone to handle a gun. Deer huntng had made him equally proficient with rifle, especially at moving game. And n the Army he had acquired an uncanny nowledge and facility with the modern utomatic pistol which was very close to egerdemain.

"I've had the boys bring up a couple of entle old mares," said Reed. "You'll ant to ride around a bit in the cool of the ay and look things over."

"I'll want to ride," agreed Dorwin, oking over the broken-down mares in the ear-by corral, "but I prefer to ride a orse, if it's all the same to you!"

"Them hosses are safe—" began Reed, ot daring to disclose the real reason why e had provided them.

"Except that they might fall down or die of old age somewhere out on the trail."

"And if you stray offen the trail," argued Reed, "they'd sure bring you back home without guides or compass."

"They'd never get out of sight of the ranch-house!"

"There ain't nothin' t' see anyway," added Allen.

"Not for those who are blind to nature and beauty," said Dorwin. "I want to ride on a real horse, now that I have grown up," he added, with a smile. "I rather like that dark sorrel."

"That there's my hoss," said Allen, with all a Westerner's jealousy of his favorite mount. "I'm afear'd he's a little too much hoss for an amateur."

"You ride him, don't you?"

"I've rid all kind o' hosses," grinned Allen. "I can ride anything that's got hair on it. I——"

He burst out into loud, explosive laughter. Another one of Allen's huge jokes had just been born. He winked at Reed.

"O' course, o' course," chuckled Allen. "You kin ride him, if you thinks you want t'. But I warn you in advance, he ain't no wooden hoss——"

"I'll ride him if you can," said Dorwin, quietly. "I'll go and change my clothes."

"By all means," giggled Allen. "Go an' put on your puttees!"

In a horsy country everyone knows horses, and individual mounts are as well known as their riders. Indeed, it is not uncommon for men to be recognized by their horses long before they are near enough to be distinguished otherwise. But, to one not so familiar with horses, a great many of them look alike, just as most Chinamen all look alike to a strange white man. And, just as there are doubles among men, looking almost alike at any distance, so there are matched horses and "ringers" that almost defy identification. Dorwin Powell, falling easily and innocently into this trap, did not notice that Allen was chewing frantically on his tobacco, his eyes wet with suppressed laughter.

No sooner was Dorwin's back turned than Steve ran into the corral and roped Allen's buckskin. He led it out and sent it running away out of sight with a slap of his hat over the rump. Charley swung aboard his horse and raced away. In a few minutes another animal, looking almost exactly like Allen's horse, was trotting nervously around the pole fence seeking to escape. It was like the first horse on the outside, but totally different within. For this was Red Trouble, the unbreakable; and only twice had he been ridden in his six years of life and then not for long.

"Jest wait, jest wait," choked Allen, "till you see th' fun!"

"He might get his fool head broke," warned Charley.

"That'll be too damn bad!" spat Reed.

It was half an hour before Dorwin Powell reappeared, in tailored riding breeches and polished tan boots. He found the entire population of the ranch stationed at good vantage points to enjoy the fun.

"You ain't changed your mind with your clothes?" asked Allen.

"Not exactly," smiled Dorwin.

"You'll find him some hoss."

"I hope so."

"You keep off that brute," warned Reed, well knowing by now that the quickest and surest way of making Dorwin do a thing was to tell him not to do it. Also, if anything happened, as he hoped it would, he could truthfully say that he had advised him not to try it. "You better ride one of them old mares I got for you."

"Saddle the sorrel," ordered Dorwin, a bit on his mettle now.

Charley roped Red Trouble, after a while, for the knowing horse knew how to avoid a rope, knew what was coming. Injun John's rope whistled over its arched neck. They choked him into submission. The men worked skillfully and with speed, so Dorwin would not really suspect what was in store for him. Inasmuch as most of their horses had to be roped every morning in this same way, and always fought saddle and bridle at first, even bucking, this was not so unusual at it would seem.

Indeed, it was quite in order, because all the horses on the ranch had been broken and trained by brute force, with never a word of kindness, never a caress of trained hands. Blindfolded with Steve's big vest, half choked, the trembling horse submitted to the curb bit, the double girths hauled tight with all Charley's strength. The animal stood there trembling, ready to fight, not understanding.

"All aboard," sung out Allen.

BUT Dorwin did not leap into th saddle, quirt and spurs ready, t fight it out with the frightened hors Instead, he walked up to it and put hi hand on the animal's quivering velvet nos speaking to it softly and yet firmly, a he had been trained among Eastern an Southern horses that were broken by kindness and authority.

"There, there, now," said he, "you aren going to be hurt."

He ran his hand along the muscle ta neck, down over the rounded withers, th swung easily into the saddle. The rop were cast loose, the blindfold snatch away. For a second or two the sorr stood there trembling and quivering, ey rolling backward toward the rider.

"Steady, steady now!"

Dorwin could ride!

He had ridden spirited and even vicio horses before. The big sorrel, with hi enemies standing about, was not to b gentled by kind words or caressing hand He ran straight toward the corral fenc as though to crash into it, swerved at th last second, whipping around like a flas then away in frantic buckjumping. Dorwin kept his seat, not surging on the cru bit, holding the horse's head firmly, speaking to it in a low voice. Eyes rolling t the whites, the sorrel reared again an again, almost straight upright, lurchin from side to side, wheeling, shaking like wet dog. It required all Dorwin's ski and experience to keep his seat.

Then, rearing high, Red Trouble lo his footing and came crashing down, literally toppling over backwards. In th fraction of a second, with the horse coming down on top of him, Dorwin thre himself sidewise, quick as a cat, and ju escaped being crushed. Hoofs thresh the air close by his head. The hor rolled and struggled to find its feet. Th Allen's rope shot out like a snake. T struggling horse was yanked to one sid both forefeet fast in the loop.

"What in thunder'd you do that for demanded Reed running up.

"To save a human life, maybe," grinn Allen. "I didn't want t' see our fun sp'il so soon."

Dorwin, hearing nothing of this, jump to his feet. Allen shook out the loop. the sorrel struggled up again Dorwin w back into the saddle. But the worst w over now, most of the fight was out of the tiring horse. Softly spoken words that only the horse heard, a firm command, and then a coaxing tone, a horseman's trained touch on the reins, the firm pressure of a rider's knees—in the end these little things conquered more than any riding skill.

"Well, well," laughed Allen, as the sorrel quit fighting and loped away, head high, bearing its rider down the trail, "you all got t' admit that lad can ride."

"Talk about Daniel in th' lion's den," gasped Steve. "That brute sure loves him!"

"Some men have a way with horses," said Reed in disgust. "They say it's all in their hands!"

"He's in our hands now," chuckled Allen.

"Curse his luck!" fumed Reed. "A lot can happen yet."

"I'll say there can!" agreed Allen.

"We've got to get rid of him before we can move that stuff out."

"If he can stand all we've got planned out fer him," laughed Allen, "I'll say he's tough."

"Tough!" sneered Reed. "Milk and water baby, soft as butter. I'll bet he's never been offen the city pavement in his life."

"He's off now—way off!"

Dorwin, having conquered and made friends with the sorrel, came trotting back.

"I rather like this horse," said he. "He's got a little life."

"We used t' think so!" sighed Allen.

"I'm going for a long ride—" began Dorwin.

"You take one o' th' boys with you," cautioned Allen. "Don't you start out alone——"

"I've traveled alone in the Canadian forests for weeks at a time and I guess I can find my way around in the open."

"It ain't that," argued Allen, "but if you get lost here you're sure a goner—hot and no water. You don't know the wells and waterholes."

"You got to be careful where you ride around here," added Reed.

"How is that?" asked Dorwin curiously.

"Up north is the Indian Reservation. You can't go there without a pass, or the troopers'll pick you up."

"An' we don't trust them Navajos none so you'd notice it," added Allen, who had the best imagination of the two. "They like mighty well t' drop a cow or two whenever they need a quarter of beef an' we jest naturally pay them in lead whenever we meet."

"All right," said Dorwin, "I don't want to start any Indian outrages. I'll ride south."

"Not too far south," said Reed. "You'll be ridin' away from your friends when you go that way."

"What kind of an ogre or fire dragon waits in the south to devour this poor country boy?" he asked.

"You'll run right against them Spaniards down that way," explained Allen.

"Oh," said Dorwin, "for true? And would you believe it, some Spaniards are mighty fine people."

"Not this bunch!"

"Old Man Vizcano is one bad hombre," said Allen. "We've got a deadline down there where you see that low range o' blue mountains. We don't go beyond that, an' you bet your boots none o' them greasers stray over on this side o' th' range."

"Well," said Dorwin, "I'll say the bridle paths are restricted in this neighborhood. On one side Indians, on another Spanish brigands and the third the desert. Can I ride back towards the railroad?"

"That way is always open!" smiled Reed.

CHAPTER IX

STORM ON THE DESERT

"THIS here wasn't exactly on th' program," chuckled Reed as he stared off into the southwest with evident pleasure, "but it's sure welcome, nevertheless!"

"It's an act o' God!" grinned Allen.

Over the ragged horizon blue-green clouds were boiling up as from some witch's caldron. A dark and fearsome vapor, whirling aloft, copper bellied, shot through with a dreadful and menacing light as the sun became obscured. Way, way off in the distant mountains a low moaning, mournful, threatening, as of vast herds of angry prehistoric beasts disturbed by this approaching storm.

"It's goin' t' be a ringtailed peeler," said Allen.

"I sure hope so," laughed Reed. "Even

though that unfortunate Eastern greenie is out there in the desert. We need rain!"

"A couple o' drops wouldn't hurt us hardly any," laughed Allen.

"If he's never seen a real sand storm he's in for a lot of trouble and excitement."

"If I knowed where he was," laughed Allen, "I'd go an' look fer him. As like as not he'll get them fancy ridin' clothes all dirty."

"You be mighty careful you don't look in the right place!"

Dorwin, riding alone in the hills, never had seen a real sand storm, or even a good imitation of one. He was a long ways from the ranch-house, in the rolling sand hills between two low mountain ranges, when the storm came up. He saw the threatening black clouds pour over the horizon and thought it was nothing more than a regular August thunder storm, such as he had seen often enough every summer back East. He expected nothing more than booming, ear-splitting thunder, blinding flashes of lightning and torrents of rain for a few minutes. After that the sun would be out again, the air would be cool and fresh.

Even the first few puffs of threatening wind did not alarm him. Thunder showers usually were ushered in by the strong breath of an angry wind. A thin veil of gray dust flared out and went whirling away, low over the ground.

"Let it rain," said Dorwin, more pleased with the prospect of a cooling shower than afraid of any wind. "Jupiter Pluvius knows we need it out here!"

Came puff upon puff, as from a mighty bellows, gaining strength with each repeated gust, ever growing more powerful, now beating down upon the hard earth, now whistling and screaming through the upper air.

A wind that on the plains of the Middle West, unleashed and unobstructed, would have been recorded as an actual cyclone. Even here, so near the mountains, it was cyclonic in its immeasurable strength, whirling down out of the hills, crashing upon the earth in blast upon blast, seeming to pick up the very ground to send it slithering and hissing along before it, digging out new hollows and piling up new hills. Before it raced a whirling, seething mountain of fine dust, writhing like some deadly chemical vapor, mounting to the very skies and darkening the sun. Behind it, like an enormous wave, quantities of sand and débris rode the wind, filling the very air. The sun hid its face from this fearsome thing; the very mountains seemed to tremble; a greenish darkness enveloped the stricken land; the harsh voice of the wind bellowed and screamed in demonic fury.

"He's right out there somewhere in th' thick o' it," said Allen, in a tone that evidenced no anxiety.

"A little luck right now," Reed was talking to himself, almost praying. "A little luck right now . . ."

With the threatening storm approaching so rapidly, and hoping to escape the downpour of rain he fully expected, Dorwin urged his mount toward a high butte where the sheer cliff would offer some protection, even if he could not find an overhanging ledge or shallow cave. The big sorrel, knowing more about what was in store for them both if caught out on the sandy plain than the rider could imagine, needed neither whip nor spur—it ran for its life. But the storm was racing down upon them like an airplane. Now dust enveloped them; now the invisible but all powerful hands of the wind thrust them back.

The first blast almost unseated the rider, then he was blinded, choking, stung with the wind driven sand. The horse was down, and up again. Dorwin rolled into a shallow depression, choking and smothering. But he was not yet frightened. He had lived through smothering gas attacks before. Hastily he tore off his shirt and wadded it over his face, breathing through its many folds, crouching there head buried in the cloth, close to earth as he could get. Roar of wind like the heavy smash of storm-driven surf on solid rock. Now he seemed to be driven into the ground and now the suction of invisible air currents threatened to lift him bodily into the air. Great quantities of loose sand went drifting by over him; he crawled to keep from being buried alive.

Then it was gone.

Traveling at that tremendous speed, in a very few minutes, the storm went whirling away, roaring on. The heavier sand dropped back to earth, dribbling for a few seconds down the steep sides of newly made dunes, then came to rest. But the finer dust hung like a thick tan fog in the still air, obscuring the sun.

His horse was gone.

"It might easily be dead and buried right here, for all I know," Dorwin mused, with little knowledge of desert bred horses. "Anyway, I'm in for a long walk."

From the crest of a near-by sand hill he could see nothing of the horse and the storm had wiped out every trace of its going. Neither could he see, as yet, much of anything else, because of the fine dust in the air.

"I don't even know," Dorwin admitted, "where I am!"

PROTECTED by the near-by cliff the ranch-house did not suffer from the storm, though dust sifted in through every crack and crevice, got into everything. No sooner had the last breath of the storm rolled away in the distance than Reed was outdoors, racing toward the bunkhouse through the dust.

"Steve — Corn — Charley!" he called hoarsely. "That fool Eastern greenie is out there somewhere in this storm!"

"Ain't that too bad!" snorted Corn.

"Get horses—go and look for him," commanded Reed, his voice rasping and rattling with the idea that shook him inwardly. "Ride—ride—he may be dead and buried in this storm!"

"Then ag'in he may not," suggested Steve.

"If he should perish—out there," said Reed— "it would save us a lot of trouble and explaining."

"You mean for us to go out there and look fer him if he's buried in this sand?"

"To make sure of it!" said Reed hoarsely.

"Ho!" said Steve.

"Ha!" cried Corn, who had a grudge to settle.

"A thousand dollars to the man who can show me that this fellow won't ever come ridin' back here!"

"It sure was one bad storm!" grinned Steve.

"Men have been caught out like that lots o' times," added Corn, "an' never rid back home ag'in!"

Dorwin Powell might be an Eastern greenie, unfamiliar with the West, but he was used to hiking, trained for long walks. A Western horseman, never walking a yard if he could ride, could not have gotten out of this serious predicament without help. But Dorwin had known many weary miles in snow, in yielding moss, in duck bogs, in the deep mire of French roads and trenches. At every step his feet sank into the yielding sand, it became oppressively hot, but he walked steadily on and on.

"If only I knew which way!" said he.

In that unfamiliar country, with the sun obscured by the dust haze, he did not know the direction of his own ranch. But this did not frighten him. Long experience in Eastern forests, camping and hunting, had taught him the danger of fear when lost in a strange country. He must not lose his head, he must not worry, he must not be afraid.

"If I can only keep a straight course," he told himself, "and not walk in a circle, getting nowhere, I'm bound to come out of this somewhere, sometime."

Keeping a straight course was not so easy in a rolling, sandy waste where every hill looked just like the next and the air so thick with dust that he could not pick out a distant objective. And, obviously he could not stay where he was—without shade, without water, without food. But, still, he did not hurry, he did not permit himself to be stampeded by fear and anxiety, nor waste his strength in any way.

"I know a little trick." He smiled a bit in recollection.

From his pocket came an old fishline, a heavy pocket knife with a ring in one end for a belt chain. He tied this knife on one end of the fishline, then unwinding the line to its full length, he went on again with the knife dragging in the sand twenty yards behind him. Glancing backward occasionally at this wake, or shallow furrow in the sand, he was able to steer a straight course, to note any deviations from a straight line in his progress. Once or twice he sat down and rolled a cigaret, taking his time about it, knowing that panic was more to be feared than being lost.

"Keep walking straight," said he, "sure to strike somewhere or someone after a bit."

A few hours of steady walking, and then, the haze thinning, from the top of a low sand hill he could see, not so far away, indistinct ranch buildings and herds of stock.

"My luck holds," he told himself, hurrying on. "I can get water and a horse here!"

He judged this ranch to be only a couple of miles away, but, after he had walked steadily for an hour, it seemed to be just as far away as ever!

"Distance is mighty deceptive out here," he muttered, tired and hot. "I never was fooled like that before."

It was but the prologue of a more prodigious joke, for, even as he looked, the ranch faded away into the dim and hazy distance. He gasped with surprise. Only to see it reappear by some subtle magic, racing nearer and nearer, distinct and plain; he could even count the horses near it! He thought his eyes, unaccustomed to desert sun, were playing tricks. Just then the low ranch buildings tipped suddenly upside down and hung there in the sky. The horses grew to grotesque and gigantic size, with incredibly long legs.

"You poor fool!" gasped Dorwin, sitting right down to rest. "That's just a common mirage. Now you *are* lost!"

In following this apparation Dorwin had wandered into a new country, far from his own ranch property and any landmark he knew, so that now, even with the sun showing, he did not know where he was nor which direction to go to get back home.

"Well," said he, grinning at his folly, "I'll strike a straight line towards that snowcapped peak and take a chance. Sure to strike a trail, a ranch, or a rider sometime another before I get to old Mexico!"

He was young and physically fit and not afraid. Even had the nearest ranch been a hundred miles away he would have made it, easily enough, all in good time, except for the desert. Men have walked the wilderness road much farther. But, on that sandy waste about him, there was neither food nor water! And the hot winds smote him and the merciless sun beat down, the loose sand dragged at his feet. This was the desert!

"It can't scare me anyway," determined Dorwin. "I know that a young man in good health doesn't actually get hungry until the third day. All food craving before that is just force of habit. By chewing a little gum and not fretting about it, I ought to survive a couple of days without water. If I don't get out of this today, after this I'll travel nights when it's cooler."

Late in the afternoon, wet with sweat and grimy with dust, he saw before him the rim of a broad mesa, a low height of purplish land like a great step upward to another great plain. And on this, silhouetted against the painted sky, were two motionless riders staring off toward him.

He ran forward shouting.

Fortunately, the riders saw him, a tiny moving black speck on that rolling sea of gray sand, and came galloping toward him. Dorwin was sure that he had been lucky enough to encounter one of his own men, and that he was not far from his own ranch-house. But now, as the rider approached, he saw a strange horse, a dark and handsome roan, close coupled, lithe of leg, well ridden. But the rider was too small to be any of his own men.

"It's some boy," he thought. "I've struck some other ranch."

He came running up the crest of another sand hill to meet the roan—only to halt with astonishment and surprise. The rider bearing swiftly down upon him was a girl!

CHAPTER X

A FAIR RESCUER

A SOFT voice spoke: *"Quein es?"*

"There," smiled Dorwin through his dust, "I was certain that I must have walked all the way to Mexico!"

"What in the world are you doing out here and afoot?" asked the same voice in perfect English.

"Waiting patiently to be rescued!"

She rode up to him, wide eyed with surprise. He saw, indistinctly through a haze that was not entirely fine dust, the wet and lathered roan, tooled black leather chaps, a man's checkered shirt with a bright silk neckerchief; but, above him, smiling down at him, unmistakably the oval face of a girl—a very beautiful girl!

"You lost——"

"Not now," smiled he.

He couldn't just believe his eyes. A girl here, in the desert. His head swam dizzily for a second or two, facing this reality and trying to reconcile it with his position. His eyes were a bit misty as he searched anxiously for confirming details. He saw that her hair, under the wide brimmed gray felt hat, was gold and her wide eyes, taking him all in, were as blue as the morning sky.

"If I were sure you wouldn't vanish—" he began, half seriously.

"Not until I know that you are safe!"

"But your ranch did," said he. "It was just as real as you—then it turned right upside down."

"Mirages," she smiled. "You must be a stranger out here."

"As new and fresh as the morning paper," he confessed.

He reached out one grimy hand and touched the wet roan to make certain all this was reality.

"Just how long have you been wandering out here and why?" she demanded.

"Ever since the big disturbance," he smiled bravely. "After the surface of the earth had been remodeled to suit the whims and fancies of the wind, I discovered my horse had been blown away—"

"Your horse is around somewhere. They are all familiar with common sand storms."

"This wasn't a common one!"

"Walking in that direction never would get you anywhere," said she.

"It got me to you!"

"Well, for your sake, I am thankful for that," she said seriously. "Another day of this——"

"Would find me marching on," he finished. "I'm rather hard to kill."

She swung off, standing beside him, a bit anxious despite his brave words, noting that he swayed a bit. Shoulder high to him, a bit excited and embarrassed, with all a woman's anxiety for his safety.

"If you ever get into another sand storm," she warned, "hang onto your horse."

"I was hanging onto the earth."

"Horses always drift with the wind."

"I think this one blew away. It wasn't a very big horse."

"When you see those greenish clouds swinging up, you ride for shelter."

"I'm learning all the time," said he.

A contralto note in her voice, an appealing trick of smiling up at him with one red cheek more rounded than the other. Suddenly, very suddenly, Dorwin realized that this was reality. He was standing before a strange girl, and all his Eastern training came surging back. He was ashamed of his dirty face, of his weakness in getting lost, of his helplessness before her, a woman. His hands were grimy, his shirt was torn, he was all sweat. . . .

"I'm sorry," said he, "to put you to all this trouble."

"No trouble. We've just got to help one another out here."

"I didn't even imagine that there was a girl within a hundred miles!"

"Lots of them," she assured him.

"Vaguely I realize there must be dusky maidens over on the Indian reservation——"

"Making bead bags for tourists."

"And maybe a dark eyed, sallow faced Spanish vamp among those greasers to the south——"

"Greasers!" Her eyes widened. "A bad word!"

"I really don't know just what it means," he confessed.

"An expression of contempt," she explained. "Yankee contempt for all Spanish people."

"As I understand it, the ranchers around here have nothing but contempt for those dirk-flinging Spaniards down on the *Rancho del Canotes*. Hence the word."

"But why?" she demanded.

"Probably they are sheepherders. I really don't know just why. I haven't been out here long enough to get all the details, but they tell me those damn greasers are all a bad lot."

"Who told you?"

"A couple of repeating rifles spoke to me on that subject a few days ago with considerable authority."

"You mean that someone—from there —shot at you?"

"Uh-huh," he nodded. "Those Mex——"

"I don't believe it!"

"Unfortunately they were such rotten shots that I haven't even a bullet hole in my clothing to prove it."

"I would have heard about it if it were true," she said finally.

"What makes you think so?" Dorwin was a bit nettled because she did not believe him.

"Because," a bit of sarcasm sharpened her voice, "I am one of those damned greasers!"

With a hollow groan, shamed and mortified, Dorwin covered his dirty face with his dirty hands and sank down in the sand at her feet.

CHAPTER XI

NEIGHBORS

SHAME swept through him. She had ridden to his rescue and he had called her a low and vulgar name! Wave upon wave of emotion swept over him. Smaller he seemed to grow, shrinking down, seeming to contract to pigmy size, no more than a worm at her feet.

"Sorry," he began, with thickened tongue, as though he had struck her in the face. "Sorry——"

"I am the Señorita Inez Vizcano of the *Rancho del Canotes!*"

"I was only trying to be funny——"

"I regret that I cannot laugh over the word 'greaser' and the merry way you have of making fun of my people," she said severely, determined to punish him.

"It's my fatal gift of humor," he grinned, standing up to face the music.

"If anyone shot at you the other day it was probably those wild and savage *Americanos* over at the Bar R Ranch."

"No," said he.

"Don't imagine they are any too good to do such a thing. These barbarian gringos will do anything!"

"Gringo," sniffed he. "Just what does that mean?"

"Utter contempt for all that Yankee outfit over there," she explained.

"No, not all of them!"

"Every last one—gringos—laughing and sneering at us just because we are Spanish!"

"Maybe most of them," said Dorwin, smiling, "but not all."

"All!" she insisted.

"All but one," laughed he, "for I am the gringo owner of the Bar R."

Now, with tables so swiftly turned, Dorwin straightened himself and gave her a stern, reprimanding look, his arms folded dramatically across his breast.

"I am Dorwin Powell and I own that gringo ranch."

Her blue eyes dropped, a flood of color dyed her oval face. She could not look at him, turning quickly aside to hide her embarrassment.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "I deserve it. Go ahead and punish me."

"Now that we have been properly introduced," smiled Dorwin, "by insulting each other so earnestly, let's be friends."

"I am properly humbled and ashamed."

"Now that you are good and even with me——"

"More than even," she said in a low voice, "for I was serious."

"All is forgiven," said he. "A gringo lost in this desert country must not quarrel with his rescuer."

A higher, richer color in her face now, a brighter sparkle to the eyes as she turned back to him, finding it easy to smile at one so whimsical and friendly.

"I supposed the owner of the Bar R was just a schoolboy."

"He was—a long time ago. He grew out of that."

"I expect that was likely to happen but never gave it a serious thought."

"I do hope you will give me a thought now and then in the future."

"I shall remember that I hurt you."

"Not a bit!"

"Well, I tried to."

"And I have learned that all Spanish señoritas are not dark and vampish."

"Nor greasy!"

"I'm most sorry about that——"

They were young, a bit lonesome for company, secretly interested in each other. Soon they were laughing and talking as though long acquainted. The girl carried a silver whistle and this she blew loudly to summon the waiting rider back on the mesa rim. When he came up Dorwin saw that it was an old Mexican, looking not a bit dangerous, dark of face, a mass of deep wrinkles, heavy mustache graying.

"Jorge," she said in Spanish, "did you ever see this stranger before?"

He shook his head in the negative.

"Do you know anything about any of the men shooting at him or at any other *Americano* lately?"

"*Madre de Dios!*" exclaimed Jorge. "We never shoot at anyone. For why?"

"Either this whimsical young man is filling my ears with adventure fiction to show me what a wonderful fellow he is," she thought, "or there is more to this than he knows, the poor greenhorn!"

She knew more than she dared tell . . . So he was the owner of that ranch . . . They were his hired men . . . She wondered how much she ought to say.

"You'll have to get up behind Jorge," she bade, "and we'll get out of here."

Dorwin swung up behind the old man who smiled kindly down at him, anxious to help him. Surely this could not be one of those bloodthirsty Mexicans who had shot at him!

"If I don't find your horse," the girl was saying, "Jorge may be able to rope one at Rock Spring when they come down to drink this evening. Otherwise I'll have to take you home with me."

"Is this the way to your home?" he asked eagerly.

"One way."

"I shall remember it."

Somehow, he felt this was a glorious ending to what promised at the time to be a serious misfortune.

"There is a horse now," said Jorge as they topped a rise.

A saddled horse was standing there, bridle dragging, gray and colorless with desert dust. A few yards more and Dorwin could see the slicker roll behind the saddle and recognized the animal.

"Why, it's old Red!" he exclaimed. "It's my horse!"

Apparently Red was none the worse for his adventure. He neighed with pleasure to see his master and other horses, shook himself like a dirty dog, trotting up in a cloud of dust.

"You ride along with us," said the girl when he was mounted. "There's a waterhole near. After you are refreshed I will show you the trail back to your ranch."

THEY rode, side by side now, through a painted land. As though to atone for its recent rage and storm all nature now put on its gayest coloring. The late afternoon sunshine, beating through the fine dust particles high in the upper air, suffused the gray desert land with gold, gilded the sand dune tops. Red-gold waves of light flooded up the rocky steep of distant mountains.

"It's a beautiful country," sighed Dorwin.

"But a hard and dangerous one," said she.

"I like it here," he said.

"If you stay a year you won't want to live anywhere else."

"Hard and dangerous," he repeated. "Beautiful but damned— See, it is desert, and so many cattle dead and dying in this terrible drought."

"Drought?" she repeated. "Why, of course—it's like this every summer."

"Is it?" he asked innocently. "I thought this was an exceptionally dry year."

"An exceptionally wet one," she laughed. "Why, we had a good shower in the first week of July!"

"It couldn't have been enough to lay this dust. There isn't that much rain in the world."

"And no cattle are dying of thirst," she explained. "At least not on any well conducted ranch. We drive them up into the hills. There are windmills and tanks, wells and water systems up there."

She did not know that all this talk of drought was but part of the subtle propaganda of Reed Howgan.

"You see," she exclaimed as they came in sight of the waterhole, "there is plenty of water if you know where to look for it."

A rock rimmed waterhole, really a small lake, sheltered from the sun by the high cliff wall. Here they stopped to water their horses. Jorge, dismounting, produced a hidden Indian bowl of red pottery and brought them a cool drink from the gushing stream bursting from the lime rock.

Dorwin drank and drank. He washed his face and his hands. He wet his hair. And laughed aloud when she combed it back into place with her fingers. He wasn't in any hurry to start back home at all!

"There," said she, finally, "I must go. Yonder is your trail homeward."

He started down it, a winding, twisting, almost indistinct pathway making its tortuous way along, but he made no further move to ride on.

"You will have to ride right along," said she, "to get home before dark."

"I am not afraid of the dark."

"If fear only makes one cautious, inquisitive, careful," she said very gently and seriously, "then it is just as valuable as courage."

"Why do you say that?"

"One hears so much that is not so," she answered cautiously. "But this I do know—the men on your ranch have always been our enemies."

"Why?"

"We do not, as a rule, ride this side of the mountain."

"Then I have been fortunate!"

"We sought shelter from the storm in

the shallow caves up here. That is how we happened to see you."

"Surely no one will bother you any more on my property."

"It is sort of a mutual agreement," said she with a faint smile. "And your people must not come on our side of the mountain."

"Does that include me?" he demanded.

She did not answer. For a few seconds she sat her horse there, head bowed, then tossed up her right hand in a sweeping gesture of farewell and galloped away.

CHAPTER XII

SUDDEN BULLETS

FOR a minute or two Dorwin sat there on his horse, half a mind to follow after, not caring whether he got back home that night or not. All the hidden things within him urged him to go on with her; and friendly voices, indistinct and all but unintelligible deep within his subconscious self, whispered to him to follow her, hinting that safety, security, as well as happiness was there. But then, he remembered, all this was, probably, no more than foolish imaginings. Surely his own men could be trusted. Very probably they were even now anxious about his safety, riding out in search of him.

"Foolish notions," he chided himself. "I must be getting weak hearted and old womanish, conjuring up out of nothing these bugaboos to make me suspicious of my own men."

He rode on, on down the shadowy trail homeward, his mind now rehearsing this strange adventure, a pleasing vision of this unusual girl, in such an unusual setting, lingering in his youthful and romantic mind.

"It's just like living your own story," he sighed. "If I told my friends back East they wouldn't believe it!"

Whenever the trail permitted he put his horse into a trot, riding proudly along, his dark head high in the evening air, a youth traveling swiftly through dreamland on the magic wings of imagination. Not even the painted sunset landscape was realistic in its glamorous colorings, ever changing, ever striving for new splendor and more wonderful prismatic effects. Now the ragged mountains rearing before him were a delicate pink against the lavender distance, now shimmering gold, now red as rubies. The heat died out of the descending sun, the cool of night came riding the long shadows which crept out from their daytime hiding in the mountains.

"I'm going to like it here," Dorwin spoke to his horse, as Western riders all learn to talk to their mounts. "It isn't the Old West, but it's just as beautiful as it ever was. Romance lives, even though adventure be but pleasant fiction. I'm going to like it here, even without stage coaches, cow towns, bandits, gunmen, without any shooting——"

He was rudely interrupted by a shrill hissing, like some powerful winged and fast flying evening insect in furious flight, whizzing by his head with tremendous speed. There came a thud of something striking in the sand immediately before him, the shrill whine of a battered bullet ricocheting high into the still air.

"Well, I'll be——"

His words were drowned in the distant roll of hurried rifle shots, booming away among the echo tossing cliffs to his right, whistling and whining all about him. Even the horse sensed instantly that the king of terrors was abroad in that land, that death threatened them both. He leaped into a plunging run.

"Steady now!"

Glancing over his shoulder Dorwin saw two shadowy horsemen dash out from behind a rock pile, lashing their ponies into a run to overtake him, to gain the few yards necessary for pointblank rifle fire. A bullet struck between the running sorrel's feet, just by good luck missing a leg; another rasped its left flank, sending it veering sidewise in pain and fright. Quite by chance this leap carried it out of the path of another bullet that otherwise would have pierced it through and through.

"What could anyone be shooting at me for?" gasped Dorwin, riding like a jockey in a hard race, leaning forward, bent down on the sorrel's neck. "Who could they be?"

He was on his own property. He was far from the forbidden territory of the Spanish ranch. In that shadowland it was impossible to identify his pursuers, and to allow them to draw any nearer was certain death.

"I don't know as it makes much difference who they are," Dorwin said grimly, "I've got to outrace them!"

Dorwin had no rifle. His little automatic pistol was absolutely useless against repeating rifles. If they rode a little nearer, into a good rifle range, they could pick him off at their leisure and not be within shot of the little gun, not even near enough for him to tell who they were.

"I've got to ride!" he told his horse.

For most the way that trail dipped rapidily up and down, winding around obstructions, avoiding deep washes, offering few opportunities for his pursuers to get in an effective shot. Whenever he was in view they blazed away. When out of sight they rode like devils, quirting their ponies on. Within a mile it was also apparent that they had the best and freshest horses!

"Great day!" cried Dorwin in alarm. "They'll ride me right down!"

Here on the sandy plain there was no place for him to hide, no opportunity to entrench himself, no chance of escape. His only hope lay in flight, to keep out of dangerous range until it was dark. All he could do was to ride, making this stern chase last as long as possible, hoping that he might meet someone from his own ranch riding out in search of him.

"I've got to ride lighter!"

WHILE the ordinary stock saddle is a comfortable seat for one all day on a horse, day after day, well adapted for the highly specialized work on a cattle ranch, it is far from being a racing pad. Familiar with horse racing in the East, Dorwin knew that in such a race ounces count and if he could get rid of the thirty pound saddle beneath him the sorrel would run just so much faster and farther. He glanced down and saw that the tie straps of the double cinches were exposed. Without hesitancy he took his pocket knife and slashed them.

It was a difficult and dangerous feat, requiring great acrobatic skill. When the girths dropped and began slapping the running horse's legs, when the saddle began to slip, the sorrel became frightened. Grasping its mane in both hands, balancing himself, clinging like a monkey, Dorwin hitched out of the seat and felt the heavy saddle slip back over the rump. Now he was riding bareback, like an Indian boy in a quarter race; now he was riding lighter, and, with the sorrel again quieted and down to business, he was holding his own.

Heavy men behind him on heavy saddles, spurring and quirting, risking all on one furious spurt as the shadows thickened into night. The rifle shots behind him became vivid flashes of orange flames, streaking like tiny rockets. But their own horses began to tire, gradually they fell behind; then the shadows swallowed them up. Somewhat less than three miles from the ranch-house Dorwin pulled up and gave his horse a chance to breathe. He rode into the littered yard, his horse wet and lathered, his face dark with rage and excitement.

"Quick," he called into the lamplit doorway, "bring out my rifle!"

"What's that?" exclaimed Reed hoarsely, at the sound of this unexpected voice, as he ran outdoors.

"Hand me my rifle," demanded Dorwin. "I'll ride back there and show them something about shooting!"

"Show who?" The words rattled in Reed's throat. His hand was ready for his gun. He thought Dorwin knew!

"A couple of damned killers have been chasing me for miles—shooting at me! Give me my rifle!"

Reed's breath came hissing back again with sharp relief. He was safe. The game could go on.

"It's dark now," answered Reed with difficulty, thanking the gods for that same darkness. "You light and rest yourself."

Allen came hurrying out.

"You sure gave us a good scare—" began Allen.

Reed gave him a warning look.

"We thought you'd got lost in that storm," Allen continued. "A couple o' th' boys are out lookin' fer you now——"

Another warning eye flash from Reed.

"If they'd happened along when them dirty greasers jumped you," added Allen, "they'd sure'd give 'em hell."

"I told you not to ride that way." Reed's voice was back again. He was recovering from his surprise and scare, seeking refuge in a scolding tone. "I told you to keep away from that Spanish range."

"I have an idea that these two bandits," put in Dorwin, thinking of the girl, "were white on the outside!"

"It's dark . . . We can't do anything now . . . Your hoss is done. So calm yourself. There ain't no novelty in being shot at in this Western country. In the morning I'll take some of the boys and have a look-see. We can't do anything in the dark."

"From now on," Dorwin's voice rang with determination, "I'm going to do a little shooting myself!"

"At who?" A challenge rang in Reed's voice as he stood there ready.

"The first man who lifts a gun to me."

For a full minute Dorwin stood there facing the two men, sensing something of Reed's half hidden antagonism. Then he went indoors.

They stood there, Reed and Allen, staring after Dorwin long after he had gone.

"Ain't he th' lucky sun-of-a-gun?" exclaimed Allen. "It'll take more'n a sand storm t' kill that feller."

"Chasin' him!" cursed Reed. "Like a lot of fools!"

"He made a race for 'em," added Allen. "He shed his saddle. Th' boy can ride!"

"Why didn't they hide on the trail and make sure?"

"Your orders were t' look fer him."

Cursing, Reed strode angrily through the night toward the bunkhouse, slamming that door noisily behind him.

"If I'd offered a special prize for a damn fool," he glared, "I wouldn't know which one of you to pay first!"

"What's eatin' you now?" demanded Charley insolently.

"Chasin' him!"

"It was dark enough—he couldn't see who we were—he didn't have a rifle. What else could we do?"

"We sure gave him th' scare o' his young life," added Steve.

"You damn brainless fools," roared Reed, a threat in his voice, "to miss that chance!"

For a minute he stood there, his right arm crooked and ready above his waiting gun. But no one answered, no one moved, no one dared accept this challenge.

"You've had plenty o' chances just as good," accused Steve.

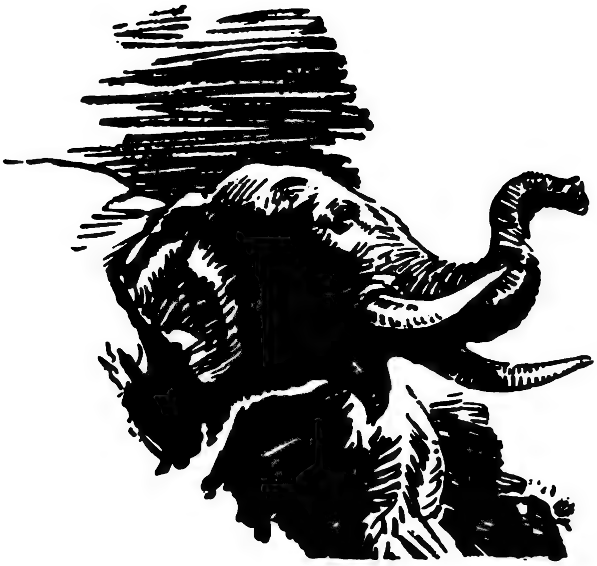
"If you've got t' shoot someone t' satisfy your bloodlust," answered Charley, "why not the man whose demise will do us all some good?"

"You may get one o' us," added Steve, "but try an' get two!"

Reed knew that while they were united with him for questionable gain, they were also banded together for their own protection against him and anyone else. He wheeled and stamped back to the ranch-house. Other opportunities would come!

In the final instalment of "Crooked Trails," coming next issue, the mastery of Bar R Ranch is settled forever in desperate open battle.

"*Tales of the Teak Forest*"



The MANKILLER

Of Ai Poy and the Humbling of the Mighty

By REGINALD CAMPBELL

JOHN HINTON, teak wallah, was surveying his elephants as one by one they came into the little clearing wherein his tent was pitched and filed past for his inspection. There were elephants with two tusks, elephants with one tusk, elephants with no tusks at all; there were shy, timid females accompanied by ridiculous calves that squealed and rapped with fright; there were elephants of all shapes and sizes striding over the sun-lit grass of the clearing.

The last to roll up to him was old Me Keo Me Wan, and as John Hinton's eyes took in her sunken cheeks, the clearness with which the ribs shone through the skin, and the great overflap at the top of the ears, he knew that her period of servitude to man was over, and that the day of her rest had come.

Hinton gently stroked the teak scarred trunk, and his eyes were dim, for a friendship of years was drawing to a close. Ever since he had first come out to Northern Siam old Me Keo Me Wan had been in the service of his company, and many and many were the evenings when he had with his own hands fed her with the soft, crushed tamarind that she loved, while she had looked at him with wise, patient, kindly eyes. But now her age hung heavily upon her, and the only merciful course for him was to let her loose, unhobbled, in the quiet forest, there to pass her remaining few years in peace and quietude.

Yes, reflected Hinton, as he gave her one last handful of tamarind, her departure from his force would be a great loss to the company, for not only was she a magnificent timber working elephant, but she ruled the other animals of the camp with an authority that was unquestioned. Fractious youngsters, trying to play the fool or shirking their fair share of dragging, were promptly brought to book by blows from her powerful trunk, and even fierce tuskers had been known to quail before the onrush of this terrible old lady. But now that part of her life was over, and only the peace of the jungle remained.

"Throw down the hobbles," ordered John Hinton to Ai Poy, her mahout.

The steel chains suspended round the

elephant's neck clattered to the ground, then slowly, majestically, the vast bulk rolled out of the clearing, free at last from the humans she had served so faithfully for seventy long years . . . .

Ten minutes later the mahout reappeared on foot from the surrounding forest and salaamed to John Hinton.

"Lord," said he, "Me Keo Me Wan is free, even as you commanded, and now I have no elephant to ride. If the Lord could give me a fierce elephant . . . . ."

"Ai Poy must wait his turn," answered the white man, "for have not the fierce elephants of the company already got their mahouts? Ai Poy will be given another female elephant."

"Lord," said the man sulkily, "I wish for a fierce elephant."

"I have spoken," snapped Hinton, striding into his tent.

Left alone, Ai Poy retired to the coolie lines and relapsed into sullen meditation. For many moons had he cherished the wish to become a fierce elephant rider, since much was to be gained thereby. True, there was danger to life and limb. But what mattered this? Since for riding fierce elephants, mahouts drew as much as fifteen whole silver ticals a month instead of the paltry eight or ten the other mahouts received. Also, be it whispered, they came in for much admiration from the dark eyed Lao girls of the little jungle villages. How often had not he, Ai Poy, heard the maidens whisper in the market place:

"See, there is Ai Mee, the driver of Poo Lai. He is a fierce elephant driver, wherefore let us move privily a little nearer him."

Or again: "There is Ai Soo, who is none other than the rider of Poo Oo, and is not Poo Oo a very fierce elephant indeed? *Wooi,* but Ai Soo looks a *man!*"

He, Ai Poy, would fain have that admiration one day, but now the Lord Hinton had told him there were no fierce elephants available, consequently his only chance lay in one of their mahouts either falling sick or being dismissed.

Being dismissed. Ai Poy froze into immobility and squatted thus for a very long time indeed. Eventually, when the sun was riding high in the heavens, he rose to his feet and walked swiftly away from the camp in the direction of the north.

After two miles tramping along the tiny jungle path, he came to a small village. He dallied not here, however, but went straight on for another two miles, when he arrived at a small attap roofed hut built in the very heart of the forest.

Now the hut was the abode of one Ai Soo, the mahout of Poo Oo, and Poo Oo was one of the fiercest elephants in Hinton's company, being a real and veritable man-killer who would obey none other than his own mahout. The white lord had therefore decreed that Poo Oo should work by himself in a lonely part of the forest at a goodly distance from villages, plantations and the scattered timber camps. Thus did Ai Soo, the mahout, live in a small jungle shanty two miles away from the nearest haunts of men.

ARRIVED at this shanty, Ai Poy glanced cautiously around, to see that Poo Oo, with his forelegs hobbled lest he should stray too far, was grazing peacefully at one side of the path. For a while the brown man regarded the elephant doubtfully, then, nerving himself, he seized a large piece of bamboo and stalked cautiously towards the animal.

Poo Oo, on sensing that the newcomer was not his own mahout, abruptly left off grazing and swung round threateningly. A moment later he bellowed and, his small pig eyes glowing redly, lunged forward to the attack.

Quick as a cat Ai Poy leapt backwards, at the same time aiming a blow with all his force at the tender part of the elephant's trunk. At the sharp thwack of the bamboo the leviathan squealed in agony, then flapped enormous ears of astonishment. Here he had met, for the first time in his life, a strange human being who was unafraid of him! His elephantine brain moved slowly, uncomprehendingly, for a second or two, then he chirruped in dismay as Ai Poy, holding the stick in menace before him, advanced once more.

"Haouw!" roared Ai Poy in commanding tones. It was enough. Poo Oo, taken utterly aback by sheer surprise, knelt humble to receive the man upon his neck.

But the mahout was content. He, Ai Poy, had shown without doubt that he was fit to be a fierce elephant rider, and his chest swelled with pride at the thought. He therefore left the elephant to its grazing and, after throwing away the stick, climbed up into the little hut, where he found Ai Soo slumbering peacefully in the shade of the attaps.

"Ai Soo is well?" inquired Ai Poy courteously when the other awoke.

"He is well," answered Ai Soo, scrambling to his feet. "The Lord Hinton, he is here? *Wooi,* but I have slept longer than I should, for is it not hot? But now I go back to my elephant."

"The Lord Hinton is *not* here," Ai Poy assured the speaker.

"Ah!" Ai Soo settled himself comfortably on his hams again.

"It is a lonely place in which thou dost live," said Ai Poy after a pause.

"It matters not, Ai Poy, for often can I go into the nearest village."

The other glanced at the jungle that walled, in solid sheets of green, all round the tiny hut, and a shiver went through his frame.

"Not for many ticals would I live here, Ai Soo," he whispered. "To live in the forest, alone save for forest devils and a very fierce elephant—*meh wooi,* I would not dare."

"I am a man," said the other importantly.

"That is so indeed, and doubtless Ai Soo does receive as much as twenty-five ticals a month from the Lord Hinton."

"But fifteen," admitted Ai Soo.

"*But fifteen!*" exclaimed his companion in astonishment. "By the honor of my father's father, it is not enough."

There followed much earnest conversation, with the result that soon Ai Soo was boiling with righteous indignation. He, Ai Soo, the greatest mahout in all the world—had not Ai Poy said so?—was receiving the absurd and unthinkable sum of fifteen ticals a month, when he should be receiving twenty-five at least. He would go forthwith and tell the Lord Hinton, who would without doubt agree with him that great injustice had been done.

Thus it came to pass that, at four o'clock in the afternoon, Ai Poy found himself back in camp awaiting, in pleasant anticipation, the reappearance of Ai Soo from his lord and master's tent.

The mahout was not kept on tenterhooks for long, for shortly Ai Soo came striding towards him. and one glance at the dusky features assured Ai Poy that the mission had been unsuccessful.

"*Leukarn!*" exclaimed Ai Soo, on reaching the other's side. "The Lord Hinton has refused me even one single tical's advance in wages."

"Why?"

"He did say that no other fierce elephant driver receives more than fifteen ticals, wherefore it was against the custom."

"But did thou not say that thou wert the best mahout in all the world?"

"I did."

"And the Lord Hinton?"

"He laughed long and loud."

"*Meh Wooi.*"

"This is bad business."

"It is indeed. And what will Ai Soo do now?"

"I return to my elephant," muttered Ai Soo sullenly.

When the man had disappeared, Ai Poy did some more hard thinking and eventually, when the shadows were beginning to lengthen on the grass, he too stole out of the clearing and hastened along the path that led away to the north.

THE following morning serious news came to Hinton. Poo Oo, one of his fiercest tuskers, had slipped his hobbles during the night and, as though bent on mischief, was approaching the little village that lay two miles to the north of the camp.

Dismissing the perspiring native who had brought the information, Hinton caused his swiftest pony to be saddled, and then rode hell for leather for the village.

Arrived at the outskirts, he dismounted and, after tying the pony's reins to a branch that overhung the path, pushed forward on foot, to meet a moment later the entire population of the village hastening in the opposite direction.

Youths, maidens, married women with children on their hips, old men, old women, human beings of all shapes and sizes streamed past him in one mad jostle of fright. The last to go by him, a bent, wrinkled old Lao hag, paused for a moment before him.

"Lord," she screamed, from toothless, betel-stained jaws, "have a care! Poo Oo is even now in the market stalls. Mother of a dog, we are undone!"

This said, she too disappeared from view, and the white man was left alone.

Hinton smiled grimly. Of a truth Poo Oo, manhater and killer, was celebrating his new-found freedom in the manner he wished, and to have already caused the evacuation of an entire native village was not so bad for a start.

Undaunted by the old Lao's warning, however, Hinton pushed on, and on rounding a corner he came to the beginning of the row of shanties that nestled on either side of the path. Then he halted abruptly, for, some fifty yards ahead of him, right in the center of the market place, Poo Oo was standing in solitary grandeur.

The elephant, as yet unaware of the white man's presence, was engaged in lunching off the sweetmeats and rice cakes that offered themselves invitingly to his wriggling trunk, and Hinton, watching, saw him sweep the entire contents of five stalls into his great, revolving jaws. This done, the elephant began demolition work. A few coconut trees went first, then the market stalls, and then the huts behind them. To the accompaniment of bellows of wrath, hut after hut dissolved into thin air, and in five minutes' time Poo Oo had worked himself up into a rage that was terrible to behold.

Now Hinton, as he witnessed the devastation, knew that his company would be liable for many hundreds of ticals' worth of damage should this continue for long, and so he nerved himself to do a very brave thing. Without any attempt at concealment, he walked openly towards the great roaring, bellowing, screaming death, and shouted the command to kneel.

At the sound of his voice the elephant swung his bulk round like some leviathan kitten and then, with one great blaring trumpet, charged.

Love of life seized Hinton and, turning, he fled away down the path again. He rounded the corner and his frightened pony, prancing in circles, came into view. With a last effort of foundering legs he reached it, ripped the reins from the overhanging branch, and then flung himself on the animal's back.

Bending double to avoid the jutting bamboos and creepers that threatened to sweep him off the saddle, Hinton flashed by the towering green walls of the jungle till he judged a full mile separated him from the village, whereupon he pulled his sweating pony on its haunches and listened intently. For a while he heard nothing and then to his straining ears there came the sound of trumpeting, followed by the noise of falling trees, which told him that he had succeeded in luring the elephant away from the village and that even now it was following up his track along the path that led directly to his camp.

Now this was precisely what Hinton had wished for, since once in the camp fierce elephant riders might be found to round up the brute, and if worst came to worst there was always the heavy rifle in his tent to be resorted to.

He therefore rode in more leisurely fashion the remaining mile to his camp, and on arrival there found an excited mob of chainmen, coolies and mahouts anxiously awaiting his appearance. Among them was Ai Soo, the mahout of Poo Oo, and Hinton blinked in astonishment, for he shrewdly suspected that dusky gentleman of loosing the elephant's hobbles and then bolting to a far distant part of the forest. But now here he was advancing, as bold as brass, out of a crowd to meet him.

"What is all this, Ai Soo?" said Hinton angrily. "And why hast thou not been near thy elephant?"

"Lord," answered the man, "I knew nought of the affair. Last night, did I not visit my mother, who lives in a village very far from here? Then, when I return to my shanty this morning, I see Poo Oo is missing, so I hasten to the Lord's camp to let him know, only to find the Lord already gone."

"But why did Ai Soo not track Poo Oo, for was not the elephant on the path leading to the village?"

"Lord, I think I go straight to you, so I take short cut through the jungle, and not go by the path."

"Liar," thought Hinton, then turned to see that Ai Poy, once mahout of Me Keo Me Wan, was addressing him.

"Master," said Ai Poy, "have I not told you that I can ride fierce elephants? If I tame Poo Oo before he reach the camp, can I have him for always?"

Hinton nodded, and a moment later Ai Poy, his features flushed with triumph, hastened out of the camp clearing and along the path by which Poo Oo was approaching.

AS SOON as the mahout had disappeared, Hinton strode into his tent, seized his heavy rifle, loaded it, then waited for developments.

They soon came, for shortly an ear-splitting trumpet sounded from somewhere along the hidden path, to be followed by the sudden reappearance of Ai Poy, whose features were now the color of grass. With arms and legs working like pistons, he literally shot through the astonished spectators and then dived into the thickest part of the jungle on the further side of the clearing.

So much for Mr. Poy, thought Hinton grimly, as the apparition vanished, and now for the next!

Ai Soo came forward.

"Pah!" said he. "Ai Poy is fit only to ride *butcha* elephants. I, Ai Soo, will go, Lord, for am I not the best mahout in all the world?"

He went, to return three minutes later traveling at an even greater speed if possible than the vanished Ai Poy. He did not, however, bolt into the surrounding jungle as the other had done; instead he shot up a large teak tree, from which point of vantage he peered down at the Lord Hinton.

"Master," he croaked with ashen lips, "have a care. Nothing living can stop Poo Oo now, for the bloodlust is upon him."

The mention of bloodlust was enough, for at the words every remaining coolie, chainman and mahout sought the safety of the treetops that encircled the camp, leaving the white man standing alone by his tent.

Hardly had the last coolie climbed up into position, when Poo Oo himself rolled into the clearing. For a second he halted and glared round the arena. Then a large fallen tree caught his attention, and, jabbing his tusks beneath it, he hurled it like a match stick into the jungle, after which he curled up his trunk and let forth one terrific bellow of rage against mankind and the universe.

Standing thus, with the brilliant tropical sunshine streaming over his gleaming tusks and massive head, his very magnificence made John Hinton's heart miss a beat. Not to everyone is it given to see sheer strength, unalloyed by the slightest suspicion of tenderness or mercy, looming up personified in the rich promise of the morning. Six thousand pounds or more of brawn and muscle, enclosing the soul of a tiger, is something that is not easy to forget, and Hinton, as he slowly raised weapon to shoulder, was aware of a strange feeling of compassion for this child of the wilds who hated the men who had chained him.

But—Hinton's eye ran along the barrel and on to the thick root of the trunk that hides the brain—Poo Oo had now become unmanageable to the men he served, and for this he must pay with his life.

The thoughts ran through Hinton's mind like lightning, and then with one finger he squeezed lightly, ever so lightly, on the trigger of his rifle, for, now utterly without sound, the elephant was charging in a swift, shuffling gait towards him.

The pressure on the trigger increased. One ounce more, and Poo Oo's career would have come to a violent end, when suddenly there came a rending of bushes from one side of the clearing, and next second a gigantic form blurred across Hinton's vision.

Crash!

Two enormous bodies met with a shock that literally jarred the earth, and Hinton, lowering his weapon, found himself gazing in amazement at the spectacle of old Me Keo Me Wan hurling, with prodding head and flying trunk, a veritable broadside of blows upon the mankiller's neck, head and shoulders.

The punishment did not last long, for soon Poo Oo, terrified and humbled by a fierce old dame he had strength to slay a dozen times over, fled panic-stricken from the clearing, leaving the old lady snorting with rage and somewhat out of breath.

THAT evening John Hinton was seated in his tent, with Ai Soo and Ai Poy crouching before him.

"Lord," said Ai Soo, "I have done well, for Poo Oo is now quieter and him have I caught and shackled."

"And I also have done well, Master," chimed in Ai Poy, "for, when I see that the Master was in much danger from Poo Oo, did I not run quickly into the jungle and catch Me Keo Me Wan?"

"What's that?" exclaimed Hinton, startled.

"Lord, when I run away from Poo Oo I

think hard all the time. I know Me Keo Me Wan still graze very near the camp; I also know that even fierce elephants are very much afraid of her, wherefore did I seek her out quickly and bring her to the clearing."

"Then why," queried Hinton, "were you not on her back when she came into the clearing?"

"Lord, I was very much afraid. Therefore did I slip off her back at the edge of the jungle, knowing that she would do the rest."

"Of a truth Ai Poy is no fierce elephant rider," said the white man after a thoughtful pause. "First he runs away from Poo Oo, then he is afraid to approach him again even when riding on another elephant."

A pregnant silence followed this sentence, then Hinton spoke again:

"In the matter of the escape of Poo Oo from his hobbles——"

The two mahouts at his feet shifted uneasily on their hams and their eyes sought the floor.

"I have heard it said by Noi Tar, the headman," resumed Hinton slowly, "that yesterday Ai Poy was twice seen going through the village that leads to Ai Soo's shanty, once in the morning and once late in the evening. Had Ai Poy urgent business up there?"

"Lord," said the man addressed, "I go walking."

"Without doubt you did, but for what reason? Now it would appear to me that Ai Poy wished to become the mahout of Poo Oo, and that he also knew of my refusal to raise the wages of Ai Soo. He *might* then think thus: I will go secretly and loose the elephant, with the result that the Lord Hinton will suspect Ai Soo of revenge and dismiss him. Thus will I, Ai Poy, become Poo Oo's mahout and gain much thereby."

Hinton paused and flashed a quick glance at Ai Soo, upon whose dusky features he noted a certain expression. Smiling inwardly, Hinton then turned to Ai Poy again, to see that undoubtedly the shaft had gone home, for the latter's cheeks were now the color of chalk.

"Lord," muttered the man, after an uneasy pause, "you are all wise and all powerful, but on the honor of my father's father I tell you I did not loose the elephant last night."

Hinton grinned openly now, since this was exactly what he had been working for.

"I never said you did," he replied. "What actually happened was that you went up north yesterday evening for the purpose of freeing Poo Oo, only to find that he had already been loosed."

Ai Poy quaked, for the sagacity of the Lord Hinton was beyond belief. Then his thumping heart quietened a little, for the all powerful white lord was at last transferring his attention to his companion squatting beside him.

"Ai Soo, why didst thou loosen the elephant?" John Hinton was thundering.

"Lord," said the latter, "I know nought of the affair."

But Hinton, remembering the look of surprise that had flitted across this dusky gentleman's features, was adamant.

"Ai Soo," said he, "thy face can I read like an open book. The fact that Ai Poy had gone up secretly to unhobble Poo Oo was news to thee, therefore do I know well that it was thou that loosed the elephant."

"Lord," whispered Ai Soo nervously, "how you do know this is beyond my understanding, but—yes, Master, it was I that loosed the elephant."

"Because I refused to raise thy wages?"

"Yes, Master."

"But how would Ai Soo gain over the affair?"

"Lord, I think like this: I think I unhobble Poo Oo, and say he escape by accident. Then I pretend I away with my mother and wait till he do some damage. Then I go to the Lord Hinton and tell him I will catch the elephant again. Then I do this, and the Lord, seeing that no other mahout can tame Poo Oo but me, will be pleased. Thus will he raise my wages after all."

"A delightfully simple plan," breathed Hinton to himself, "which didn't exactly come off."

Then he addressed the culprits aloud:

"There has been evil work here," he told them. "Also much foolishness. There will therefore be punishments. Thou, Ai Soo, shalt have thy wages reduced to ten ticals a month, yet still ride Poo Oo. Thou shalt also, with thine own hands, help to rebuild the market stalls of the village. In addition, thou shalt be fined two ticals a month till the damage done to the cake and rice dainties is all paid off."

"Lord, the punishment is too great. I will ride Poo Oo no longer."

"In that case," said Hinton slowly, "I go tell the villagers the whole truth about Ai Soo. And they, knowing their lives have been in much danger by reason of his action, will be very angry, so that extremely unpleasant things may happen to Ai Soo."

"Lord, I ride Poo Oo and do all that you say," replied Ai Soo hastily.

"And now in the matter of an elephant for Ai Poy," said Hinton. "I have one for him."

"The Lord is good," remarked Ai Poy gratefully.

Hinton smiled grimly, then shouted for his little headman, to whom he gave a certain order. The headman salaamed in understanding, and hastened into the surrounding jungle, to reappear shortly leading an elephant by the ear. It was a tiny little creature, only just broken in and barely four years old. Being far too young to drag timber or be used for transport work, Hinton was in the habit of loading it with an absurd howdah, in which were placed a few of the lightest articles of his camp kit, and then taking it round with him on his travels. Normally it would have been ridden by some young mahout learning his job like the elephant, but now the white man motioned Ai Poy towards it.

"This shall be thy elephant, Ai Poy," said he, "and thy pay four ticals a month."

A roar of laughter went up from a group of drivers who had assembled near the tent, and Ai Poy flushed darkly. He, a full mahout, and destined to be a fierce elephant rider, was reduced to this!

"I refuse, Lord," he said sullenly, "and shall leave the company. And is this my reward for saving the Lord's life?"

Hinton looked at him narrowly, but the speaker would not meet the white man's steady gaze.

"Ai Poy is good at tales, and maybe that is another tale. Whether it is or not, the fact remains that Ai Poy like Ai Soo, has done much evil. Now supposing the villagers were to hear that Ai Poy had even thought of loosing——"

"I take the little elephant, Master," said Ai Poy hurriedly.

LATER that evening John Hinton caused his headman to bring Me Keo Me Wan into the clearing again, for he knew that she still was grazing in the vicinity of the camp as if desirous of remaining near the humans she had served so faithfully and so long.

"Now I wonder," he whispered, as he handed her the soft, crushed tamarind that she loved, "I wonder whether Ai Poy has ever slung leg across thee since thou left us. I wonder whether Me Keo Me Wan, on hearing the uproar of Poo Oo, did not come of her own accord to humble him, the while Ai Poy cowered in the thickest part of the jungle? Yes, I wonder, old lady."

But Me Keo Me Wan could only rumble with satisfaction. She had done a good deed that day, and the tamarind tasted good to her.

A Rich and Racy
Fish Yarn

The COME-ON MUSKIE

By ARTHUR R. OTIS

IT WAS in the lobby of the Bass-Oreno Inn at Fishgut and the bus had dropped me in company with a dozen or so fish-hungry anglers who for six long months had been fly casting at toy balloons anchored to steam radiators. I had used two bottles of Three in One oiling up my twenty-one jeweled reel that winter, and at times, the library back home in the Oswald Apartments looked like a net weaving establishment with my silken ton-tested lines stretched like a gigantic cobweb from Mozart over the piano to Lindbergh over the radio. I staggered into the lobby of the Bass-Oreno with my load of bait lore and imported, split bamboo poles, guaranteed to cure curvature of the spine in a forty pound muskie, when who should I bump into, pushing a broom around the wicker chairs and between the glittering brass cuspidors, but Silas Stickumup.

My fifty dollar tackle box, built like a salesman's sample case, crashed to the floor spreading fish-orenos, bass-orenos, babe-orenos, plugs, daredevils, wabblers, pikie-minnows, Finlander baits, and No. 12 spoon-hooks all over the place. Before I could close my gaping mouth, Silas leaned his broom against a radiator and was down on his knees gathering up the sparkling come-ons and grinning sardonically.

"Bring a bushel basket, you. We'll never get all this bunk back in that spoon-hook chest—not that it matters . . . What the hell's the use!"

"Silas," I was down with him now gathering up the prickly cargo, "what do you mean? I never heard you talk this way before. Boy! I loaded up with half of this junk merely on your say-so last summer. And what the devil you doin' here broom pushing for O'Malley?"

"It's a long story." Silas handed me the last phosphorus wriggler and in his haste to reach his broom, tipped over a cuspidor. He pointed his slim, elongated beak of a nose in my direction and due to the cast in his eye, turned one glassy orb on me while the other blinked at O'Malley, back of his cigar case.

"Come away from them other suckers!" Silas grunted. "Do you think I want 'em disillusionized by my angling confessions? When I get through biographin', the poor dubs wouldn't even untackle their tackle boxes."

"Still, they're kind of necessary?" I interrogated.

"More so. They're even a necessity for them that don't need 'em," Silas chuckled.

I registered, then surreptitiously followed Silas down into the washroom, where I cornered him.

"Now, Silas, I've got a good notion to straighten your nose. Why the devil aren't you out at the Muskie Lodge demonstrating your handmade plugs on that old snake you had tied up to the dock all these summers? Quick now, talk intelligent! I'm not goin' to invest a small fortune in tackle on your say-so for nothing!"

SILAS began his story in his best tombstone manner as he focused one hard-boiled orb on me and the other on the light fixture overhead——

It's curious how the Muskie Lodge was frustrated by the thrift of an Iowa banker-camper. One of these birds who rolls in with a Cadillac limousine and a trailer combined kitchen and small-section-city-apartment tagging behind. All he wants of you is to furnish the lake with a daily catch of fish that offsets his camping and boat rental expenses—if he should want a boat. This bird had his own, one that collapsed and folded up into a teapot and was inflated, ready for the water, by the unabstemious use of a tire pump. You could hear his kicks, when he went down to the bait box for some of those thirty-five cent shiners, clear into the dining room of the lodge. He was a suspicious anglin' Sherlock Holmes, always sniffin' at the little strings of croppies my Tulsa guests were bringin' in and booing their exciting encounters with the big ones who, after ruining hundreds of dollars' worth of tackle, invariably got away.

Last season was our banner year. Jesse James had a horse, but I had a line of handmade plugs that went like hot cakes, a bait box full of shiners, three guides, forty scows, and a lodge full of them sporty oil field fellers. Not only that, I had a Muskie Come-On System that would have broke Oklahoma in a couple of years if it hadn't been for that swaybacked, bullhead fisherman. . . .

You know, I had a standing order with the Rainy Lake Fisheries for any of the forty pound muskies that occasionally got tangled up in their nets. That is, I didn't place the order, but I had an old cobbler here in town place it for me . . . Never mind the consideration . . . Well, 'bout the opening of the pike season, here comes a big long box of iced fish to Mr. Half Soler, and the folks at the depot guyed him considerable for a resident in the heart of the Arrowhead country shippin' in fish from Kanuck. That night I spirited the long box away from the back door of his shop. When I unpacked Mr. Muskie my eyes sure did pop out. He was a beauty! 'Bout four feet long, with a belly on him like a Nebraska hog and spotted like a tiger, and with a head on him that every Tulsa fisherman would be sure to put a price on. Muskie Lodge was as good as booked full for the season and I could be as sassy as I pleased with the campers.

First, I called in the three guides for a conference and made them swear allegiance to the Come-on Muskie; then, we injected some embalming fluid into him and I made a small incision along his back fin and inserted a coil spring. After we sewed Mr. Muskie up, we coated him with shellac and the effect was beautiful to behold. By holding him up by the jaw, the slightest twist to his head and he wriggled like a muskie in the death agonies. I wanted to insure him against detection for two thousand dollars, but couldn't think of a company that wrote fish policies. So we buried our breadwinner in the ice house and I grouped my trusty lieutenants in the cellar and disclosed to them my brigand intentions.

Previously I had planted a hundred Snap-Pluggers in the bay upon which the Muskie Lodge fronted. A waning supply of croppies and snake pickerel drove me to it. Oh! I forgot, of course, you never saw one. But you lost a lot of tackle on 'em, let me tell you! Old Muskie Lake has been a boon to the artificial bait companies, and last fall, after the season was over, I dragged the bottom of the bay to the tune of a bargeload of plugs and spoonhooks that helped wash out the second mortgage on Muskie Lodge.

A Snap-Plugger is one of my own little contrivances worked out in the secrecy of my cellar during the long months of winter. It's a couple of fifty pound mushroom anchors hooked together by a half dozen door springs and dropped into the muddy bottom of Muskie Lake. You troll back and forth over a bay full of Snap-Pluggers and fall out of the boat with excitement.

Fun! Sport! Boy! I've given those Tulsa people fish stories to carry south with 'em that become epic before frost hits the Oklahoma peach crop. You cast out your spoon-hook with a couple of sinkers, then reel in slow, when all of a sudden, *wow!* a tug at the line that nearly capsizes the boat and your reel sings merrily as you pay out the line. Then vicious jerking and pulling and, after you've played the monster a few minutes, you try to reel in savagelike and *bang!* goes the reel or the rod or the line, and you're another one of those honest guys that the Snap-Plugger has made liar.

There was another device I had worked out in my underground workshop in the off season. I called it the Submarine-Go-Getter. It was a rather complicated device that I used only once a year; generally on the Fourth of July when my entire fleet of scows dotted the lake. I took the butt out of a hollow cedar tree and fashioned a couple of pointed wooden plugs to fit tightly into each end; I then took the spring and mechanism of a talking machine and centered this in the cedar log, coupling it to a shaft and propeller that protruded through one of the wooden plugs. You cranked this machine from the outside and when properly weighted, the top and sides festooned with grab hooks, it would strike a bee line along the bottom of the lake through the network of plugs, bass-orenos, spoons, wriggly frogs, shiner minnows, and pork rind that cluttered the bottom of Muskie Lake during the golden Fourth.

It was always good for a waterside riot and a half dozen capsizes, and I generally followed it's wake with a motorboat and boat hook to pick up the excited survivors. The Snap-Pluggers and Submarine-Go-Getters had carried the fame of Muskie Lodge from the Tulsa oil fields to the California hop fields and kept home brew in the system of Silas Stickumup for many years. But that Iowa, bullhead fisherman. . . .

OUT in the resort game you have got to show the fish. There comes a time when you need a real sure 'nough wrigglin', shiny Muskie Come-On, fresh drippin' from the water in the hands of a flushed and excited and jubilant angler.

The next day, three Tulsa Lincolns and an Iowa Ford drove into the yard of the Muskie Lodge. Silas Stickumup was there to meet 'em, downcast, and sober.

"How's fishin'? Any fish in the lake?"

"Well, gents, she ain't what she used to be. Time was I had a footpath wore from the dock to the ice house. There's some grass there now. But, gents, be reasonable. You can't always expect to go right out to the end of the dock and cast out and bring in a forty pounder. No, I can't do it myself and I've been here twenty years. But, of course I don't recommend it, but, if you want the services of a guide who has made a close and intelligent study of the muskie and his habits and habitat, why, I believe I can guarantee you some real sporty fishin'. Wait a minute. There's a boat comin' in now. Climb out, gents. Seein' is believin', of course. I suppose it'll be just my luck to lug you down to the dock to see a measly string of croppies. But come on, gents, I'm game to gamble with you that it's a muskie."

As we went trottin' down to the dock, I noticed a light shining in the window of the gable facing the bay as per arrangement.

Big Luke, the guide, was standin' meditatingly in the scow.

"Any luck?" called one of the prospective guests. "I don't want to see any croppies. We got them down south in our own mud holes. Come now, don't tell us we trotted down here for nothing?"

"Wal now," Luke drawled, "I don't know whether you'd call it luck or not, but this is just one of the regulars."

He leaned over in the bottom of the scow and pulled up the tiger muskie, gleaming spottedly in the sunlight, jaws agape showing rows of jagged teeth, and wriggling fiercely on the end of Luke's chain.

At that moment a skiff pulled alongside the dock and that Iowa bullhead fisherman was waving at us the broken pieces of an imported split bamboo rod. From head to foot he was sopping wet and considerable peeved in the bargain. He rid his system to wit:

"There's another twelve dollar rod to kindle the fire with! I smashed two in the last week on them unseen monsters. Damned if I can get ary a glimpse of 'em! They got a tug like a ten ton cat and one of 'em jerked me head over heels into the water. If my new rod, which was presented to me by the Dubuque Rotarians, hadn't snapped in two, them whales would probably have got yours truly. I got a bill of damages against your old lake to the tune of twenty-five dollars for rods and thirteen dollars and sixty cents for Dowagiacs, and all I got in the ice house to meet it, is a half dozen croppies and a couple of snakes. If you fellers'll come down to Dubuque, I'll show you some real bullhead fishing off the river front."

We flourished the forty pound muskie before him, but he was unabashed.

"He's got an awful glassy eye for a wiggling tiger muskie right out of the water. How'd you catch him? With a steel parbuckle? What makes his skin so shiny?"

We hustled our Come-On Muskie away to the ice house and I signaled Luke to get our prospects away from the clutches of that Iowa sleuth.

For a week everything went lovely. Each day when a likely lookin' Lincoln or Caddy drove into the Muskie Lodge, some one of the three guides would pull into the dock with our sucker bait and pretty soon I was makin' up beds in the hay shed to take care of the overflow.

Then, one afternoon, down to the dock comes our Rotarian. He had lost another Dowagiac and the Snap-Pluggers weren't even giving the croppies a chance at his bait. I kind of gave a start when I see his new rod and reel. He had had the local blacksmith clip a piece of five eighths steel rod 'bout six feet long. To this was riveted a big reel of brass wire to one end of which was coupled a grappling iron. The crank to the reel was 'bout as big as the one on my jitney. He grinned at me sarcastic like and grunted:

"Didn't know I was a deep sea fisherman? Yep! I camped on the Gulf last winter and know how to pull the wires on them ocean prey. I'm gonna do a little private investigatin' of them unseen whales with the proper tackle this time. No more fiddlin' 'round with split bamboo."

He no more than shoved off than I called Luke aside.

"Luke," I says, "see that skiff pullin' out in the bay? Well, there's the Sherlock who's goin' to bring home the Snap-Plugger bacon. Git busy! Jump into the motor boat and run him down kind of accidental like, and don't break your neck to pick 'im up, neither. He's as aquatic as he's thrifty."

In a few moments, Luke is chugging across the bay in the direction of our fish hound and I rushed out to the gate at the clarion call of a klaxon. After a ten minute confab, during which I high-balled the wife to set the signal in the gable window, we all swung down to the dock and sure enough there was guide No. 2 rowin' in leisurely like with our Come-On Muskie close followed by an irate figure in a skiff and out in the middle of the bay is a stalled motor boat and Luke wigwagging the message "Out of gas!"

The strangers was in the midst of ecstacies as old Come-On wriggled lifelike in the hands of the expert, when a hundred yards off, the man in the skiff turned 'round a beetlin' red face and hallooed:

"Wait 'till you see the big one I got!"

Then he buckled to his oars and in a jiffy shot alongside the dock. I felt a kind of numbness startin' in at my toes and workin' upward. Something like old Come-On experienced a couple of weeks previous when he tangled up in the nets of the Rainy Lake Fisheries.

In the bottom of the skiff in a riot of copper wire and mud and seaweeds was one of them criminal Snap-Pluggers!

Maybe they wouldn't have run me off into the woods if that anglin' sleuth hadn't pushed the coil spring clear through the hide of old Come-On and then hollered:

"Come on, let's run him to death!"

AN ANGRY face peered 'round the top of the washroom stairway and Silas Stickumup jumped for his broom.

"Hey you! You're runnin' no Come-On here. Bring a couple of clean cuspidors up to the lobby."

I chucked my chest of spoon-hooks through the washroom window.

"Silas, I'm taking the next bus for home. I'll never wet a line again except in 'Field and Stream.' You have shattered my paradise. I have fished the whole continent over and never had such sport as fighting your Snap-Pluggers!"

"You're right," said Silas. "Think what I done for Sport!" and he disappeared upstairs with the cuspidors.

A Complete Novelette
of Achin in Sumatra

GUN CARGO

When the Fiercest of the Malay Peoples Ran Amok

By MURRAY LEINSTER

". . . . The chief Acheh characteristics are independence, cruelty, and untrustworthiness . . . . Merchant vessels visiting this coast should be on their guard against surprise by the natives and never allow armed parties to come on board, or unarmed ones in any number."
Asiatic Pilot, Vol. VI, U. S. H. O. Pub. #162. Pp. 421-422.

". . . . All along the coasts of Achin military posts have been established . . . . (and) . . . . practically the whole . . . . is now more or less explored and under control."
Encyc. Britt. 12th. Ed. Article "Sumatra."

". . . . It's a hell of a country for a white man."
Private letter to the author.

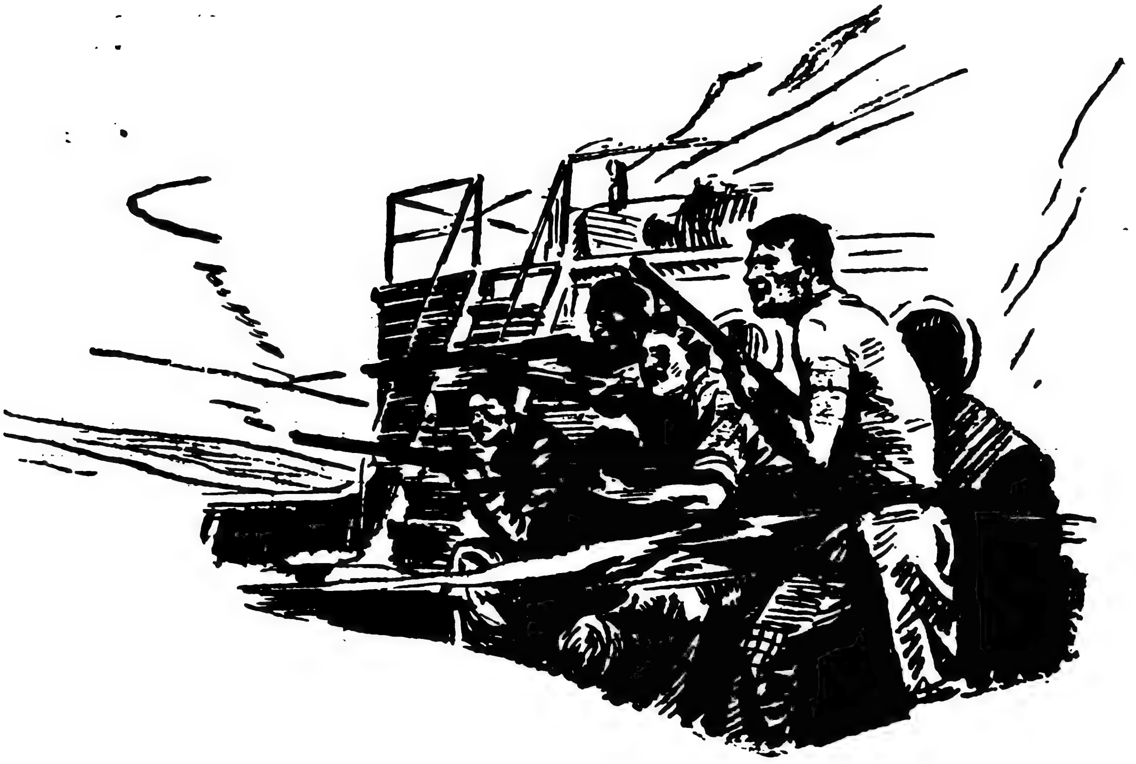
CHAPTER I

THE CHUCKING ASHORE OF CAPTAIN DENNY

CAPTAIN DENNY'S arrival in Ujong Pasir was attended with undesirable tumult and disturbance. Ujong Pasir, you are to understand, is a calm and peaceful town. It has to be. Its population used to be mostly Achin men, who are not notorious for pacifistic tendencies, but the New Netherlands Government came in in a fine Hollander exasperation a few years ago. After some fighting it subdued the Achin men, encouraged Malays, Chinese, and various mongrels in their midst, disarmed the countryside with true Dutch thoroughness, and implanted a garrison and a Herr Commandant to see that things went on as they should. So Ujong Pasir is a peaceful town. It spreads out under the sun, sleeps most of the day, gambles all of the night, and smells to high heaven from one year's end to the other. Which is typical of most towns from Surat Pass to Kalambayan.

And the *Rose of Achin,* like a sensible ship, usually keeps well out to sea on her voyages down the Sumatra coast. So far out, in fact, that she is visible only as a smudge of smoke down below the horizon, which smudge of smoke the town of Ujong Pasir regards without interest or agitation. But on this one especial day the *Rose of Achin* headed inshore until her sooty upper works and rusty hull could be seen distinctly. She is not a pretty ship, but in spite of her white officers she is owned by a wealthy Singapore Malay of more than usually nefarious inclinations, and he does not believe in paint very much.

She dropped anchor half a mile offshore. There was a struggle on her decks, indistinctly made out from the beach. Something which squirmed and fought was put



into a boat. A heap of Malay seamen swarmed into the boat to hold the struggling object down. The boat came at panic-stricken speed for the shore. It backed around to the jetty, a furiously battling something was thrown out and onto the jetty, and the small boat turned around and went back toward the ship.

Captain Denny was left upon the shore, shaking his fists at the boat and the distant steamer and swearing at both objects with the greatest possible fluency in the very dregs of the Malay language.

The small boat drew out of ear-shot, even out of hearing of the stentorian howls of wrath that Captain Denny sent after it. He continued for a few moments anyhow, raking up the last insults a copious vocabulary afforded and bellowing them until the brown faces of the oarsmen had dwindled into small, chocolate-colored blurs.

Then he turned about and inspected the town before him. He saw, of course, the four-square, solid brick building which was the residence and official headquarters of the Herr Commandant. Beds of flowers, planted and tended with true Dutch neatness, flanked it on either side. And beyond and all about that miracle of tidiness was spread out the not particularly attractive duplicate of almost any other town on the west coast of Sumatra.

He regarded a mud mosque and a Chinese joss-house and various structures of all imaginable materials from coral blocks to flimsy bamboo and empty oil-cans, with a single respectable *gadong* bearing the thrice-sacred name of Bromberg & Co., Ltd.

The town of Ujong Pasir regarded a sandy-haired man with a beak of a nose and a fresh knife-cut on his cheek and a costume typical of the tropical beachcomber; tattered canvas shoes which let his toes show through, patched and disreputable trousers, a more disreputable shirt, covered by a tattered drill coat, and a most disreputable hat.

Captain Denny came to several unflattering conclusions. The smell of the town rose placidly to the high heavens. The Herr Commandant slumbered peacefully in his regular after-luncheon nap. A kite, soaring overhead waiting for something to die, remained afloat on lazy, utterly motionless wings. And the sun beat down with bored violence. The heat was genuinely terrific. It made the earth hot to walk on and the dust of Ujong Pasir a choking, impalpable torment. It set the horizon aquiver and made the mountains inland dance indecorously. It made Ujong Pasir a furnace, a blistering version of hell on earth which was only tolerable because at nightfall it would be cooler and instead of collapsing under the sun its inhabitants might breathe in ague and fever from the hill country.

And then a figure stirred from the motionless, drowsily amused inhabitants of the town. It was Christopher, Number One boy of the sacred house of Bromberg & Co., Ltd., padding through the dust from that single respectable *gadong*. Christopher had once been called Soo Lin, and that name fitted him much better. He approached Captain Denny with an apologetic air, his eyes gleaming earnestly behind thick spectacles, his rather wispy frame tense with resolution.

"I heard you, sar," he said—a trifle weakly as Captain Denny's scowl was bent upon him—"I heard you speak, sar, to the men of the boat. So I brought you this."

"What in hell?" demanded Captain Denny.

He took the slip of paper Christopher extended, and Christopher retreated precipitately. Captain Denny was reading the first lines of a tract, neatly printed in English, which began:

"Think! The blasphemy which comes so lightly to your lips may send your soul to hell! Is it worth the price?"

Captain Denny tore the offending document into bits and made for Christopher with a savage purposefulness. And Christopher dusted across the way and scuttled into the gateway of Bromberg & Co., Ltd., with a desperate intensity of purpose—speed.

His pursuer followed him but a few paces. He stopped and felt in his pockets, as if doubtful of small change. He seemed to find something that would serve and made for a Chinese drinking shop whose symbolic sign all the world could read without education.

PEACE descended upon Ujong Pasir again. The sun shone down. The Herr Commandant, slumbering heavily, turned the prickly heat on his left side to the couch and allowed the prickly heat on his right side to stop itching. Captain Denny, in the drinking shop, became, in time, somewhat mollified. Christopher, in the cubbyhole of the Number One boy for Bromberg & Co., Ltd., went through a large assortment of little leaflets and solemnly selected a suitable number. The youngest Bromberg, in charge of the Ujong Pasir branch of Bromberg & Co., Ltd., for experience and the good of his soul, cocked his feet on his desk and snickered a little at the memory of his pious Number One boy scuttling for safety with a panic-stricken face.

Time passed. The sunlight, from merely scorching, became a furnacelike blast. The few small sounds of the town died down and became more drowsy from sheer heat, and then ceased. The youngest Bromberg dozed. Flies buzzed.

Christopher— *née* Soo Lin—closed the door of his cubbyhole and padded softly to the outer gateway. He opened it and fell over the prone figure of Captain Denny, slumbering calmly upon the threshold.

Christopher picked himself up with pursed and pained lips. He rubbed off his spectacles and surveyed Captain Denny's disreputable figure. He sighed, and drew out his little packet of leaflets. He padded piously on his way after leaving a carefully selected specimen tucked in Captain Denny's flaccid fingers. It began:

"Is it too late? No! By God's grace many sinners even worse than you, my friend, have been saved from the curse of drink."

Whereat Captain Denny swore luridly when five minutes later he was within the sacred portals of Bromberg & Co., Ltd., and was moving with ponderous swiftness for the youngest Bromberg's office.

That young man awoke with a start as Captain Denny pushed open the door and came in.

"How do you do?" said Captain Denny. "I am Captain Frederick Denny and I'm in a hurry. If you don't throw me out of here in three minutes your throat will be cut before night, most likely."

"Get out of here!" said the youngest Bromberg angrily. "You're drunk!"

"I probably am," conceded Captain Denny, "but this is important. I was chucked off the *Rose of Achin* just now because I overheard two coolies on board talking about Taku Umar. Interested?"

The youngest Bromberg hesitated for an

instant, doubtful in spite of himself. Taku Umar, of course, is the last pretender to the throne of Achin and cherishes a poisonous hatred for white men in general and the Dutch in particular. He knows he can't recover his throne, but it is a good excuse for a rebellion at any time and your Achin man never looks far for an excuse for a fight. So the youngest Bromberg, living in Ujong Pasir, which has forcibly been made peaceful and is always uncomfortable about it—the youngest Bromberg was interested. Acutely so. Like a lot of other people, his skin tingled unpleasantly when the activities of Taku Umar were mentioned. But he remembered something suddenly, and besides, Captain Denny looked like a beachcomber and acted like one.

"No," said the youngest Bromberg coldly. "I'm not interested."

Captain Denny rose and yawned.

"You might tell old Van der Heyden," he said, "that Taku Umar is going to raid the town here while he's off laying an ambush at Krung Raba. He wouldn't believe me."

Young Bromberg felt his scalp prickle. He knew the Herr Commandant was planning an astute and elaborate trap for Taku Umar at Krung Raba, and that he had every reason to believe that Taku Umar would fall into it. But the youngest Bromberg was not supposed to know it. And the irascible commandant would order him and the local branch of Bromberg and Co., Ltd., out of Ujong Pasir if he seemed to have been spying.

It alarmed the youngest Bromberg. On the one hand, to face Grandpapa Bromberg after the loss of the local branch through his indiscretion. On the other, to see Taku Umar coming joyously into the town with his hillmen intent on a short raid and a bloody one . . . It frightened the youngest Bromberg, and being frightened he grew angry.

"You're crazy!" he said.

"Not crazy," corrected Captain Denny. "Drunk, if you wish. The *Rose of Achin* is running guns for him. And I asked questions in that Chino drinking shop. That's why I came to sleep on your doorstep. I'd have been knifed if I'd stayed in there."

The youngest Bromberg became rattled.

"Get out of here!" he ordered, beating on his desk with his fists. "Get out of here before I have you thrown out!"

"I've been thrown out of better places than this," said Denny, "and you couldn't throw me out anyhow. But to prove I'm right, I'll throw myself out."

He departed. The youngest Bromberg, heard a sudden uproar begin just outside his office door. The uproar moved suddenly to the outer gate of the *gadong*. Staring from his window, he saw Captain Denny roll over in the dust as if thrown forcibly out by many hands. He saw him rise to his feet and shake his fists at the entire enclosure and especially at the youngest Bromberg himself. Captain Denny's lips moved, and it took no cleverness whatever to deduce that he was swearing.

Then he limped away, leaving a rather shaken young man staring after him. Captain Denny had gone perhaps two dozen paces when something happened very suddenly indeed.

From a space between two crazy houses a pair of Achin men leaped out. Without a sound, without even the heartening *sorak* which would have proved them Malays, they fell upon Captain Denny, their knives glistening in the sunlight. His arms shot out like pistons. In seconds, within clear sight of the four-square miracle of tidiness which was the residence of the Herr Commandant, the three figures were a swirling, tumbling heap of fighting men, rolling over and over in the dust.

A drowsy sentry stared, then howled for an officer. In three minutes a file of native soldiers, each man immaculate, was marching precisely toward the scene of disturbance. But the fray had lasted only two minutes and a half. At the end of that time two Achin men, one with a broken arm, were darting here and there among the maze of nondescript houses and losing themselves thoroughly from sight or pursuit.

The file of soldiers reached Captain Denny. They gathered him in, efficiently, while he swore at them and accompanied them without resistance. He vanished into the four-square brick building in which the Herr Commandant still slumbered upon his prickly heat. Calm descended upon Ujong Pasir once more.

But the youngest Bromberg was deathly white.

"He said," he chattered, "that if I didn't throw him out in three minutes my throat would be cut before night. And he pretended to be thrown out and they tried to knife him. They wanted to kill him before anybody would believe he knew what Taku Umar is going to do! And they know he must have told me!"

The youngest Bromberg looked like a very sick young man.

"He wasn't lying." He licked his lips. "Taku Umar is going to raid the town while the Commandant is away . . . . And they'll try to kill me to keep me from warning him!"

Here the youngest Bromberg made an error. Captain Denny was under arrest for disturbing the peace of the New Netherlands. He was quite safe until he should have a chance to try to convince the Herr Commandant Van der Heyden that he was neither astute nor intelligent in laying traps for Taku Umar. And there was no particular point in trying to kill anybody else while Captain Denny was safe and free to talk.

But the youngest Bromberg looked acutely ill. He fumbled in the drawer of his desk and pulled out a revolver in spite of a definite racial antipathy against bloodshed. He looked at it and gagged.

And then, suddenly, he looked up as if something had come into his head to drive away all thoughts of his own danger.

"Ethelda," said the youngest Bromberg rather shrilly, "Ethelda is right in his line of march for here!"

He bit his nails, shivering. And then, with trembling hands, he rummaged in his desk drawer for the box of shells that went with the revolver. He still looked rather frightened, and he still looked rather sick. But somehow he did not look like a man who was thinking exclusively of his own skin.

CHAPTER II

THE RAID ON SOLANDA

IT WAS at about two o'clock by the local time of Ujong Pasir—which is the local time of the one hundred and fiftieth meridian, or seven hours east of Greenwich—that Captain Denny was chucked ashore from the *Rose of Achin*.

At three, he was under arrest for having disturbed the peace of the New Netherlands by fighting with two natives; in solitary confinement for having knocked together the heads of two soldiers who had tried to search him for weapons in pursuance of the Dutch policy of strict disarmament of all inhabitants of Achin; in deepest disfavor with the commandant for having interrupted his afternoon nap; and sentenced to a fine and imprisonment for having violated the quarantine regulations of the New Netherlands Government. In having landed from the *Rose of Achin* without permission from the harbor master, the Herr Commandant Van der Heyden, Captain Denny had been guilty of a henious crime, which he instantly aggravated by a profane adjuration to the commandant not to be an ass.

His hearing came to an abrupt and undignified end. The Herr Commandant became purple with rage, beat the air with pudgy fists, and ordered Captain Denny forthwith removed from his presence. Which was done in a still less dignified manner, the tumult thereof causing fascinated speculation throughout the whole population of Ujong Pasir. Most of them thought Captain Denny was being murdered. A few considered hopefully that the victim was the Herr Commandant.

Both opinions were proved wrong when at sundown the Herr Commandant posted sentries about the town with strict orders that no one was to leave it under any circumstances, and went forth into the jungle at the head of his files of soldiers. He was entirely unharmed, but he grew red with rage when an additional tumult came from the cell in which Captain Denny was confined.

He was unaware of the information Captain Denny had not been permitted to impart; that Taku Umar was waiting blandly for him to depart from Ujong Pasir, that Taku Umar was receiving a large and expensive shipment of highly modern weapons, and that Taku Umar intended to permit the Herr Commandant to wait by an astutely planned but entirely empty trap while he raided Ujong Pasir. That one raid, with the rifles it would display, would reestablish rebellion in all of Achin. And while Achin is at war, Achin is happy.

The Herr Commandant departed and darkness fell upon the town, the soft and velvety blackness which comes upon the world just under the equator at sunset. It is always hot and stifling in Ujong Pasir for a while about sundown. Dust swirled beneath the feet of the drowsily moving people who stirred with the darkness. The sentries watched lest any messenger slip through their lines. The hot wind from the sea had stopped and the town became wrapped in its own pestilential smells for a space. Presently the wind would blow down from the hills and bring ague and fevers. In the meantime Ujong Pasir sweltered, and yawned, and drowsily awaited a more comfortable time for its nightly iniquity.

The youngest Bromberg shivered in spite of the heat. He knew of the sentries and their orders to shoot anyone who tried to pass their lines. Those orders would be carried out even against a white man. He had made certain preparations of which the Herr Commandant would not have approved at all, and he planned other activities upon which his Grandpapa Bromberg would have frowned.

He waited, nervously, until the Herr Commandant had been gone a full half-hour. Then he slipped out of the *gadong* of Bromberg & Co., Ltd.—he slept there, following a well-established family custom of living at his place of business—and went through the soft darkness toward the row of tidy brick cells behind the commandant's house. His teeth were chattering, but as he drew cautiously near he found his problem simplified. Captain Denny was swearing.

The youngest Bromberg stumbled over something which squeaked, at which his hair rose on end. Then he identified the squeaker and laughed in sheer nervous relief. He had thought it a hillman intent upon assassinating Captain Denny through his cell window, since the attempt that afternoon had failed. Instead, it was Christopher.

"What the devil are you doing here?" he demanded in a whisper.

"He, sar," explained Christopher in the same whisper, but with anxious unction, "he is man of wrath. So I threw little tract in window, sar."

He waited, uncertainly.

"Wait here," said Bromberg. "Miss Waring is in danger. I may need you."

He listened, and there was no sound but the wrathful growls of Captain Denny. He crept forward once more.

"Denny!" he panted through the bars.

"Get to hell away with your blasted tracts!" roared Captain Denny.

The youngest Bromberg gasped, until he remembered that the few little native soldiers remaining would understand Malay, and possibly Dutch, but would not comprehend the English words at all. They would take the outburst for Captain Denny's continuing fulminations.

"It's Bromberg. Meyer Bromberg. I've come to get you out!"

"Now, what the hell?" queried Captain Denny.

He came inquisitively to the window.

"I've found out you were right," panted the youngest Bromberg. "The commandant has gone off to Krung Raba with his soldiers. And Miss Waring is right in Taku Umar's route if he comes here. He'll raid the mission on his way!"

He was passing in a huge bunch of keys that clanked softly in spite of padding. Then a round black cylinder.

"Flashlight," he whispered. "Try them. If they don't work, I've got a saw for the bars."

The glow of the flashlight showed inside instantly. There were little metallic clickings and scrapings. Then a larger click.

"All right," whispered Captain Denny. "With you in a minute."

The youngest Bromberg drew back, suddenly feverish with impatience. The night was strangely and horribly still. The languid rolling of the surf on the shore, with little slapping noises against the jetty . . . . That was all except for drowsy murmurings from the nondescript houses. The palms were still, their long fronds drooping motionless in the blackness. The hot, dry air was stifling.

There was a strangled cry somewhere and the shattering explosion of a firearm close by. Then Captain Denny loomed up, swearing softly as he ran through the darkness.

"Guard," he said briefly. "Tried to bayonet me. His gun went off when I choked him. We've got to move from here."

The youngest Bromberg darted away. Sheer instinct led him to the sacred *gadong* of Bromberg & Co., Ltd. Little padding sounds behind him filled him with fear until he remembered Christopher.

He bolted the gate behind the three of them. Inside the building he halted, panting. He faced the saturnine and alert Captain Denny.

"Taku Umar will raid the town," he said, "and there's a mission station in his way. Miss Waring's father is the missionary and Taku Umar will wipe them out."

"It follows," agreed Captain Denny, "from what I told you."

He noticed Christopher and regarded him unpleasantly. But Christopher looked first frightened, and then horrified, and then said anxiously:

"Sar, the Rev'end Waring is not at mission. He preaches at Solanda tonight an' Missee Waring is with him. I hoped to hear Word of God preached until sentries forbade."

The youngest Bromberg stared, then the color came back into his face, and then he grinned in a sickly fashion.

"Then," he said relievedly, "we've only got to look after our own skins tonight."

"The hell we have," said Captain Denny calmly. "Solanda is where the *Rose of Achin* is landing guns for Taku Umar."

HE GAZED upon two utterly stricken, utterly terrified men then. Christopher seemed to grow gray beneath his yellow skin. The youngest Bromberg was rigid for a few seconds, and then he wrung his hands.

"Taku Umar is there," he groaned. "Ethelda's taken. . . ."

Captain Denny regarded him impassively.

"The devil of it is," he observed pleasantly, "that with those guns he'll come straight here."

The youngest Bromberg was not listening. Christopher was blubbering suddenly, and if you have never seen a bespectacled, reedy young Chinese convert weeping hopelessly, you have not seen the ultimate in the grotesque.

"I think," said Captain Denny, "that it's up to us to look after our own skins as you said."

The youngest Bromberg clenched and unclenched his hands.

"I'll give you ten thousand guilders," he cried wildly, "if you'll go——"

Captain Denny stared at him.

"If you'll go with me," panted young Bromberg, "and help get her away. Or kill her if we can't get her away."

"Ah," said Captain Denny. "I heard a rumor of sentries. Is it true?"

Bromberg nodded, staring unseeingly at nothing, with his hands spasmodically closing and unclosing.

"We may have to spoil a few of them," said Captain Denny. "Can we get any other men to go with us to Solanda."

"No, sar," sobbed Christopher. "They are heathen. There will be only us three."

"I'd like to have a gun," suggested Captain Denny.

The youngest Bromberg gave him one.

"We might start," said Captain Denny.

They went out of the *gadong* once more. And again it was velvety dark and utterly still and rather terribly peaceful. The bare beginnings of festivity could be heard; a stringed instrument somewhere to which a woman was singing with a perfunctorily seductive intonation; the quiet but desperately intent sound of men already gambling at *tepo*, with the occasional rattle of the cover of the box in which the red-and-white die was spinning. Over in the four-square brick building which was the commandant's headquarters, there was confusion and much babbling. Native non-commissioned officers strove to imagine what would have been the Herr Commandant's orders and to obey them.

The three traveled silently through the night.

DARKNESS, and stillness save for the lazy surf upon the beach. They moved on softly. Past houses of all imaginable varieties—purest Chinese, and purest Malay, and those bastard structures which spring up in the wake of the white man, using his cast-off oil cans and other rubbish as building material. Past a family quarrel; past a howling baby which was being soothed by low cooings; past three men talking excitedly in low tones, with the unmistakable intonation of Achinese.

Dark palms loomed overhead, through which the stars blinked intermittently. Ahead, here, was the sentry path constructed by the Herr Commandant in compliance with Hollander notions of tidiness and for the convenience of knowing exactly where a sentry ought to be. It was very convenient for everybody, Taku Umar's friends and well-wishers in particular.

"Sh-h-h!" said Captain Denny in a whisper.

A timid, lonely little figure moved past them with a rifle on his shoulder. Captain Denny darted forward and vanished behind the trunk of a palm tree. A moment later he was behind still another, farther on and nearer to the sentry walk.

There was a little murmuring. The two sentries at adjoining posts were exchanging words. They parted, and one came back . . . .

There was a flash of white in the darkness and a curious little muffled "Crack!" Then a motionless clump of mingled white and darker tints.

"Come here!" called Captain Denny in a hoarse whisper.

The youngest Bromberg and Christopher went forward swiftly.

Captain Denny picked up the limp little man in the tidy uniform and tossed him over his shoulder.

"When this chap comes to," he whispered, "we'll turn him loose. And he may, just possibly, come back and bring some other soldiers after us. We'll hope so, anyway."

He moved off. Christopher forged ahead in the darkness and took the lead. He swerved to the right and began to lead the way along a path which plunged abruptly into abysmal jungle.

Black, columnar trunks rose on every side, sometimes swathed in creepers which overwhelmed them until they seemed frozen in a titanic struggle. Some of the trunks leaned wearily against others which were succumbing under the added handicap in that silent and merciless struggle for existence which is the jungle.

The jungle leaves were still, but sometimes a writhing thing slithered away at the sound of human feet. Human paths are game trails also in the backward parts of Sumatra—and Achin is backward. Sometimes there was a scraping of little, claw-armed paws overhead. And now and then there was a swift and soundless beating of wings and a dark thing hovered in mid-air about the trio and flittered away in a peculiar preoccupation. Once, too, there was a long droning howl a long distance off in the jungle. It might have been anything on four paws, but it was assuredly evil.

Christopher padded onward through the jungle path, his light clothing making a blur of whitish gray which the others followed blindly. Captain Denny strode easily, disdaining the possibility of an obstruction in his way. The youngest Bromberg brought up the rear. He was silent in a desperate, stricken silence. From time to time he wrung his hands in anguish.

The raiding of Ujong Pasir he could view with alarm, but no horror. He could probably escape somehow. But the capture of Ethelda roused him to a frenzy of which he had not suspected himself.

He knew he could never marry her unless he rose to heights of desperation and defied the united Bromberg clan. And besides, she liked him and seemed to find pleasure in seeing him, but had not yet seemed to perceive the passion for her which devoured him. The youngest Bromberg, despairingly, had never even hinted at his own feelings, but he was aware of his passion as never before at the the thought of her as prey to Taku Umar. That ex-royal personage had a reputation, even in Achin, for the national traits of treachery and cruelty. He would not kill Ethelda perhaps—not yet—but before she had ceased to divert him he would have made her long for death as for a blessed mercy.

Captain Denny alone of the trio approached calmness. He halted suddenly and dumped the little sentry unceremoniously upon the path.

"This chap ought to be coming to about now," he announced. "Maybe he's faking."

Whereupon the sentry gasped.

"Orang putih!" he said and wept passionately for joy.

Coming back to consciousness being carried through the jungle, he had thought that he had been captured by Taku Umar's men or someone of like tendencies. He wept now in relief at finding himself merely the captive of white men.

"You may go back," Captain Denny told him briefly in Malay, "or you may come with us. Taku Umar is going to raid Ujong Pasir while the commandant is away."

He started on again. Without a load he strode in more carefree fashion still. The little sentry stood stock-still, staring, while the youngest Bromberg trudged desperately on past him, his hands closing and unclosing agonizedly in the darkness. The army of three marched on along the jungle path and disappeared. The little sentry was left alone. Something howled far-away, a long and droning howl that might have been produced by anything on four paws.

The little sentry ran, panting, to follow the trio as closely as he dared. If Taku Umar was to raid Ujong Pasir, he would stay with the white men who generally had a knack of keeping their skins whole. And besides, to return was to be questioned and probably put in a cell for deserting his post, with more grievous punishments when, or if, the Herr Commandant returned.

"HOW far," demanded Captain Denny suddenly, "is it to this Solanda place?"

"Six miles, sar," Christopher told him. From the tone of his voice his eyes must have been full of tears when he added, "Often, sar, I have walked this path to hear Word of God preached by Rev'end Waring. Solanda is preaching station, sar."

"We've come two miles," said Captain Denny. "Hm . . . ." He strode on. "The *Rose of Achin* will be lying off and on the coast," he went on a little later, musingly, "and she wouldn't dare close in to the land until after dark. Then—how's the harbor?"

"Bad, sar," said Christopher, swallowing a lump in his throat.

"She'll be sounding," pronounced Captain Denny. "The chances are she won't be in until we get there. And considering . . . . We may even beat Taku Umar there. He'll wait, if he has any sense, to see if old Van der Heyden is acting on what he thinks I told him. I would, in his place. Watch the old chap. If he made for Solanda, I'd loot Ujong Pasir. If he sat tight, I'd get the guns at Solanda. As it is, Taku Umar can do both. What a wonderful party his men will have tonight! New guns and two towns to loot!"

He strode swiftly. Christopher padded noiselessly ahead, tears blurring his eyes behind their thick lenses. The youngest Bromberg came behind, sick with despair and yet cruelly conscious of such minor and yet terrifying things as what his Grandpapa Bromberg would say, sitting with his black skullcap on his head and his white whiskers drooping over his chest in the luxuriously ornamented head offices of Bromberg & Co., Ltd., in Paris. The youngest Bromberg clenched his teeth in a puny defiance of such personages as Grandpapa Bromberg and Fate. He kept doggedly, desperately on the insane enterprise of going with one Chinese and one fluent beachcomber to snatch from a royal pretender his chance at a savage throne.

"You know," said Captain Denny after an instant, "I overheard a couple of coolies talking on the *Rose of Achin*. They didn't know I understood them. But a cargo of Chinese coffins isn't a plausible deckload to be landed at Solanda—after dark. You know it isn't. I put two and two together and asked them about it. One of them tried to knife me!"

He seemed amused at the recollection.

"One of them was the chap who'd bought the guns and stored them in the coffins for delivery. He had quite a belt of gold pieces on. And when I was firm with him and insisted that I'd have to have some of the gold pieces or spoil his game, why, he tried to knife me. Quite seriously, he did! And there was quite a pretty scrap until the skipper of the ship pulled in to shore and chucked me off. Badly worried, the skipper was. Seemed not to know he was running guns. The coolies were fighting to get at me before I could talk to the skipper, and I was rather angry and fighting to get at them . . . . So of course, when I was chucked ashore——"

He stopped short, made a plunge past Bromberg and came back leading the sentry by the ear. The sentry was paralyzed with fear.

"March up there with Christopher," ordered Captain Denny.

The little sentry fell affrightedly into line.

They went ahead through the blackness of the jungle. Captain Denny, finding his advances toward conversation ignored, whistled softly through his teeth. He kept up easily with the pace that had been set, which was the fastest that a man could keep up for the miles that remained to them. If they did not get to Solanda before Taku Umar, the question would arise of getting to Ethelda and shooting her, mercifully, before they were killed themselves. To this desperation the youngest Bromberg was roused. Christopher likewise was capable of martyrdom in the service of the Reverend Peter Waring, who had converted him from a comfortable heathenism, and whom he unfeignedly adored. But nobody but Captain Denny himself knew to what nobility he was attuned. Judging by his conversation, nothing very remarkable.

Their legs went automaton-like, covering space, and all about them the night noises of the jungle went on, and their ears were strained for the sounds of shooting and of massacre before them. Solanda, like Ujong Pasir, had houses to loot and women to ravish, and its occupation would not be conducted quietly. But they heard the dull booming of the surf on the beach, and the isolated little noises that the jungle makes even when it is supposed to be asleep, and they saw a tunnel of mere blackness before them, while they were surrounded by an obscurity so complete that it seemed oblivion. And that was all.

And then, when the pace was telling on all of them but Captain Denny, very thin and far away they heard the hoot of a steamer's whistle. And they went on desperately and suddenly they heard, muted and faint, the music of the Reverend Peter Waring's congregation singing. The music was of the most trivial and the words were Malay, so the result was not inspiring to anyone but the devotionally inclined.

"Taku Umar hasn't reached the town yet," panted Bromberg. "Let's hurry!"

He speeded up the pace until it was almost a run. A quarter—half a mile . . . .

Someone sneezed off in the jungle and there was the muttering noise that a body of men makes when it is traveling along a footpath with some effort at silence. Then a man called angrily upon Allah because he had caught his foot in a root, and another made a not particularly polite jest of the matter, with references to the approaching looting of Solanda and later of Ujong Pasir.

Christopher wavered and stopped. The youngest Bromberg wrung his hands again. The little sentry bolted, only to be seized by Captain Denny as he passed him and be shaken until his teeth rattled. He howled in an ecstasy of terror.

"*Verdamm!*" roared Captain Denny in a surprisingly lifelike impersonation of the Herr Commandant Van der Heyden. "*Schweinen, vorwaarts!* Make a lot of noise, you chaps," he ordered in normal tones, and ran forward dragging the paralyzed little soldier after him and swearing luridly in as complete a reproduction of the Herr Commandant's vocabulary of expletives as he could remember.

Christopher padded after him, resolute but speechless. The youngest Bromberg came on in a perfect frenzy of resolution, with cold chills running down his spine and his revolver out and ready. Running, he stumbled and fell and his revolver went off thunderously. He was up on the instant, sobbing in an inextricable mixture of despair and hatred of the unseen men, and went on in a species of hysterical desperation.

FROM the jungle came shrill cries. Firearms boomed uselessly, their flashings illuminating the undersides of the overhanging foliage. But mostly, in this other party in the jungle, there was surprise and alarm and a frantic desire to explain to the rear of the column that the Herr Commandant and his troops were at hand.

Captain Denny ran on, swearing copiously in Dutch, mingled with Malay and scraps of other dockside objurations picked up in a varied career. He was suddenly silent but kept running on, and Christopher behind him felt the tunnellike vacancy on his left that was the jungle path the Dutch administration requires shall be kept open between all villages in Sumatra and especially in the province of Achin.

From that tunnel came a confused noise and the explosions of firearms. Your Malay —and the Achin man is after all a sort of Malay—believes that a gun is always efficacious. If you see something to shoot at, and shoot at it, you may hit it. If you do not see anything to shoot at, but shoot at it anyway, why, your chances are less-but you still may possibly bag something. So he shoots at all times and upon all occasions, when flurried.

The youngest Bromberg saw the flashings of guns down the tunnel of foliage that was the intersecting path from the hills. He emptied his revolver down it, hysterically, and kept frenziedly on after the running figures before him.

They ran on, panting, while tumult and confusion filled the jungle behind them. Captain Denny swung the little sentry before him, set him on his feet, and prodded him with the muzzle of his revolver. The sentry thereupon became filled with a more intense fear of Captain Denny than even of Taku Umar and ran like a deer.

And suddenly the jungle broke and they beheld Solanda before them. There were half a dozen flickering lights and the vaguely revealed shapes of houses that were more purely Malay than those of Ujong Pasir. Thirty or forty houses, all told, sprawled out upon a beach from which a flimsy wharf for loading dhows and junks with copra and dried fish and rattan projected. Perched precariously against that wooden wharf was the *Rose of Achin*, her decrepit appearance hidden by merciful darkness, with a lantern slung over her side and men transferring heavy boxes to the wharf itself.

"We've got to hurry," panted the youngest Bromberg. "They'll be coming after us."

"No," said Captain Denny. "They're hunting for the Herr Commandant and his men. In jungle like that they could wipe him out and they ought to know it."

The youngest Bromberg, however, had broken into a run and was tearing down into the village of Solanda. Men, stirred and uneasy because of the firing in the jungle, felt instinctively for the arms the New Netherlands government had taken away from them as the hatless, sobbing figure in white man's clothing fled past them. The flapping figure of Christopher with spectacles agleam, racing to warn the Rev'end Waring of the coming of Taku Umar, increased their uneasiness. Some scowled at the nipa-palm shed from which the voices of the congregation called out rather squeakily in a decidedly tinny hymn-tune.

Flaring torches of resinous wood illuminated that shed, which was inherently and inevitably a fire-trap, and shone upon brown faces singing lustily if unmusically while the Reverend Peter Waring beat time with a black broadcloth arm and Ethelda played patiently upon a most disharmonious folding organ. The congregation was earnest, fully clothed, and sweating. The Reverend Peter Waring was tired but resolute about his duty of preaching to the heathen and to those he had brought into the fold. Ethelda was patient and seemed to be rather wistfully thinking of something else. The hymn went on to its triumphant if squeaky close. The Reverend Peter Waring raised his hand for attention——

And the youngest Bromberg burst into the place, his face smeared with mud from his fall, a naked revolver in his hand, and hysteria in his voice.

"Taku Umar's coming!" he cried shrilly. "Get out of here and hide! Ethelda! I've come to get you safe!"

Christopher panted into sight behind him.

"Rev'end," he squeaked. "Heathen are without like wolves of fold. Let us pray an' run away."

There was stunned silence in the missionary shed, and in that silence which held as the youngest Bromberg stumbled toward Ethelda in a passionate desire to be near her and kill any man who essayed to touch her—in that silence, the sound of distant shooting could be heard. Taku Umar's men, combing the jungle cautiously for the band of not very bloodthirsty soldiers they thought they had heard, had found something to shoot at. Nobody ever knew what it finally turned out to be, but the shooting made a noise that this time the singing of the congregation did not drown out.

That faint popping-away off in the distance, coupled with the dread name of Taku Umar, brought a momentary paralysis of terror to the shedful of converts. They swayed in their seats for an instant. Another moment and they would run away in a wild and aimless panic, in which from the sheer noisiness of their flight they would be easy prey for such of Taku Umar's followers as chose to follow them to pick out the women and kill the men.

But just before the scream that would have started the stampede, Captain Denny came in into the torchlight. He was disreputable to look at, with his revolver in the exact middle of the little sentry he had kidnapped and who was gray with terror. Captain Denny was clothed in the ultimate decay of the white man's costume. He leaned against one of the supporting posts of the missionary shed, smiled easily at the Reverend Peter Waring and said with uncanny distinctness:

"My own suggestion is that everybody run down to the ship and get on board. Then we can either steam away or fight."

THE Reverend Peter Waring was no coward. Neither was he a fool. In seconds his voice was booming with its full, pulpit delivery.

"Jambatan! Kepal!" and he was down in the middle of the throng and urging men up and out and shepherding women and children with them. He had wisely wasted no time whatever on niceties of grammar and diction. Two words, shouted, had put the idea into the heads of every convert. It only took his example of movement toward that designated objective, to start his flock in panic-stricken haste toward it.

They poured out of the shed in a tumbling, racing flood of badly scared folk; men babbling of Taku Umar and his reputation, which is not a nice subject for discussion at any time, and the women weep ing and calling for their children in terrified wails, when those small mites of humanity were missing.

The youngest Bromberg clung blindly, doggedly, to Ethelda's immediate neighborhood. His teeth were clenched. He was shaking all over with the hysterical determination that had motivated him from the beginning. He followed her about with his revolver unnoticed in his hand while she gathered up and sent off scared or sleepy children and frantically searching women. Christopher hovered about the Reverend Peter Waring, trying busily to help him but shaking with terror now that he had borne his warning.

Only Captain Denny idled. He leaned against the post which had supported him from the beginning, twirled his revolver-muzzle idly in the middle of the scared small sentry's back, and waited with a good deal of patience for the matter to be ended.

When the last member of the congregation had been herded out of the shed, the Reverend Peter Waring nodded abstractedly to him and started off himself. Captain Denny straightened up and followed.

Out in the open air again, they were in a peculiar silence. Ahead of them was that muttering roar that a mob makes when it is in a hurry. Behind them were shouted, screamed orders.

"They've found out they were fooled," said Captain Denny pleasantly. "They're coming on the run now."

He walked toward the tumult ahead of them, which rose suddenly to an uproar. The houses all about them were deserted. The yet unconverted villagers had been swept along in the panic of the congregation and all were on the rickety wharf, clamoring to be permitted on board the *Rose of Achin*. There was, really, nowhere else for them to go. Solanda is most indiscreetly built on a sort of peninsula and Taku Umar's men were coming down its neck yelling.

It was, if one had an eye for such things, an extraordinary setting. A hot, still, and stifling night under the equator, with the air utterly calm and the only natural sound the lazy breaking of minor waves upon the sheltered beach. Ahead, the rusty and decrepit *Rose of Achin*, besieged by a panic-stricken mob which held up children imploringly and begged by all the varieties of theology to which its members had ever been devoted, to be let on board. A lantern slung over the steamer's rusty side threw its glow upon four snarling Achin men with rifles still sticky with the grease in which they had been shipped, holding back the crowd with increasing ill-humor. They were not shooting—not yet. Even an unarmed mob in such desperation could and would tear four riflemen to bits.

A pale faced white man looked down from the bridge. He was hardly more than a shadow against the star-studded sky, but he could be seen to be moving uneasily. The rest of the ship was silence and darkness. The white officers of the *Rose of Achin* had found the ship abruptly taken out of their hands when they touched at Solanda. The native passengers who had engaged deck passage from Loong to Tapanuli scowled in a fashion that proved them Achinese and fingered knife hilts suggestively. The crew was overawed. And the Achinese, without offensive movements toward the white officers, had tacitly taken over the ship in its entirety. When they had unloaded what they wanted of its cargo, they would most likely let the ship go. In the meantime the white officers were doing nothing to make the situation more precarious for themselves.

THE first running wave of Taku Umar's followers reached the first houses and plunged into them. They yelled at discovering their emptiness and dashed into others. The main body, also running, reached the village with *krises* out for the slaughter that is the conventional first action of an Achinese force on raiding a neighboring village. They found nothing to slaughter except dogs and chickens. They roared in wrath and came on down toward the wharf.

And the four rifle-armed men glanced at each other and grinned, and raised their rifles.

Captain Denny strolled into the lantern light. He clung to the shoulder of his shaking captive and with precision shot the first of the riflemen. With a panic-stricken roar, the mob streamed over his body, through the others and on board the ship. In that wild rush, crazy with fear as they were, they bustled and crushed the other three past all possibility of rifle wielding.

One of them was jammed against a post by the pushing, fear crazed bodies, and while helpless for the moment but cursing savagely, he was neatly gutted by an inhabitant of Solanda who had not listened to the Reverend Peter Waring's preaching and was consequently still unregenerate.

The mob poured on board the ship, the women hunting frantically for places to hide, the men running aimlessly about because they found that the ship was not an entire escape after all.

"On board!" boomed the Reverend Peter Waring from the deck. "I'm cutting the cables!"

The ship, almost on the instant, shivered and veered off at the bow. The ebb tide was tending to carry her away from the flimsy wharf anyhow. Captain Denny was roused to action beyond his apparent desire to stand amiably and watch as the world went by. He drove his captive up and on deck and scrabbled his own way ungracefully after him.

Then there was a scream and an upsurging of men from the engine room. Little, snarling, *kris* wielding men who had been deck passengers from Loong to Tapanuli, but would apparently leave the ship at Solanda, came up out of the engine room into the blank, soft darkness on deck. One of them stumbled close to Ethelda, snarling as he tried to blink away the light dazzlement and begin to kill.

The youngest Bromberg shot him as he reached out his hand toward her.

At the shot, pandemonium broke loose. Christopher extracted a firearm of ancient vintage from his baggy, flapping trousers. Shivering with terror, he nevertheless appointed himself the Reverend Peter Waring's bodyguard. The little sentry frenziedly found a hole and dived into it. It happened to be a ventilator and he was stuck there until pulled out the next morning. Captain Denny advanced with a sudden roar and there were stabbing flames from his revolver splitting the darkness. Men who were yet unregenerate among the villagers and in consequence were able to take a practical view of the situation, plunged into battle behind him. In the murky darkness, unrelieved by any light whatever save the stars and the glare that streamed up from the engine room hatch, there was a nasty mêlée for minutes.

It was horrible—blind stabbing and fighting and gouging and tearing, amid a mob of shrieking women and howling children, while the Reverend Peter Waring at the stern hacked at the one remaining cable with an entirely inadequate penknife. With a shudder the ship snapped the last few strands and went floating leisurely away on the ebbtide. Screams of rage came from the shore as the *Rose of Achin's* riding lights went sedately and coyly and with a vast deliberation away from the wharf.

Then there were splashes. The unregenerate among Captain Denny's untirely unofficial followers were possessed of *krises* now, taken from the men who had made the splashes. They went panting busily about the decks in search of somebody to kill. Considering the fact that they would have been *krised*, their homes looted and their women violated by Taku Umar's men as a sideline to gunrunning if they had not stormed the ship, it seemed the businesslike thing to do to kill anybody on board who was likely to help Taku Umar retake it.

From the engine room came excited voices and the hissing of steam. Captain Denny peered down the hatch. A hose was being hastily fitted to a steam pipe and would shortly be turned on the swarming mass on deck. This was not intended as malice; but to the men of the *Rose of Achin's* crew the tumult on deck had not been remarkably reassuring. There had been fighting and killing and a surging mob had overwhelmed the ship. It looked and sounded like piracy of purest ray serene; and piracy on the Sumatra coast is not a game for teaching chivalrous behavior. The crew of the *Rose of Achin* was fitting a steam hose for the preservation of its own throats against the pirates it believed in.

But Captain Denny slid into the hatchway, lifted his revolver, and sent six shots splashing about the group with the steam hose. They scattered with howls during the first five shots. At the sixth, a tumult and roar surpassing all other alarms of the night burst out. Captain Denny's last shot had richocheted against a steam supply valve. It cracked the cast brass of that useful bit of machinery. The casting gave abruptly. And with a screaming roar the engine room became a cloud of live steam, mixed with boiling water as the release of pressure produced violent ebullition in the boiler.

Not only the engine room became an inferno of steam. All belowdecks was filled with the searing, seemingly white hot stuff. From the engine room hatch came a succession of bouncing figures who plunged out as if shot successively from a gun, howled when they reached the open air, and plunged overboard for coolness. From every deck opening the scared members of the crew popped out and dived frenziedly for the coolness and safety of the water overside.

The last splash died away and the last swimmer struck out for the shore. The *Rose of Achin* drifted peacefully and deliberately, twisting as it drifted and roaring thunderously within, away from the wharf. The banked fires beneath the boiler proceeded to cake thickly because of the excessively low grade fuel supplied by the ship's owner, and the boiler itself became nearly empty and thereafter bubbled gently like a tea kettle.

And then the *Rose of Achin* drifted bow first onto a bank of mud, settled firmly in the new berth, and tilted slightly as the ebbtide drew away from her.

From the shore came an uproar which was close to bedlam. Taku Umar, as an ex-royal personage, was even less patient than a royal one with untoward events that affected his well-being. On the wharf were several cases of rifles, sticky with grease, which had been unloaded before the missionary meeting broke up. But there were no cartridges for the beautifully new and shiny weapons that peered out of heavy Chinese coffins. They were, for all practical purposes, a dead loss. And out in the sheltered if fever laden waters of Teluk Solanda—which is Solanda Bay—there was the decrepit *Rose of Achin* crowded with prospective victims to his wrath and even more important, with a further supply of rifles and an abundance of shells.

Taku Umar, raging as only an Achinese princeling can rage, prepared to storm her with the village boats. Flames broke out in the houses on shore, partly to burn them as an act of revenge, and partly to furnish light to launch the boats by. And then from the ship arose a squeaky and rather tinny noise. Somebody had started a hymn; whether out of piety or the more practical purpose of calming down the converts to usefulness, nobody knows. The effort did not get very far, dying away after no more than half of a verse. But it made Taku Umar froth at the mouth and it did have some effect on the converts. They stopped running around in circles and got into a frame of mind where they might be set to work if any work turned up for them to do.

But Captain Denny with the other unregenerates was breaking open cases of rifles and giving sketchy and only partly accurate instructions in their use. Captain Denny was thoroughly at home. He sat upon an emptied Chinese coffin with a half-bottle of confiscated whisky in his hand and swore luridly as he supervised the task at which his heathen worked eagerly.

Ethelda Waring was near by, for once taking no part in the religious music on board. She was watching the unpacking of the rifles. The youngest Bromberg was beside her, curiously exhausted by his emotions, and with his revolver at last hidden away.

The ship was a curious sight, stranded upon a mud bank with a forgotten lantern hanging over her side, a crowd of half-heartedly singing Malay converts on her decks, and with the impenetrable jungle of northern Sumatra all about her. Steam yet oozed from belowdecks, and there were two or three dead men still lying where they had fallen, and there were Malay women absorbedly soothing small children.

But possibly the most curious of all the things to be observed upon the *Rose of Achin* that night was the startled and astonished half recognition, half fascination which was in the eyes of Ethelda Waring as she watched the somewhat intoxicated Captain Denny drive his unregenerates about the task of getting rifles ready for the slaughter of their fellow men.

CHAPTER III

THE COURAGE OF CHRISTOPHER

WHEN the sun rose next morning upon the *Rose of Achin* she was virtually a wreck. There is little rise and fall of the tide on the west coast of Sumatra, and what there is follows no discernible law, but the *Rose of Achin* had been drifted away from Solanda wharf by the ebb and piled on a mud bank. During the night she had been swung around at a particularly insane angle by the flood and the shiny new rifles on the wharf could have raked her decks if there had been any ammunition for them.

She was rusty and decrepit of appearance. Two of her boats hung drunkenly at the end of their falls. There were bullet marks on what paint remained to her; the two boats aforesaid were punctured and splintered in half a hundred places, and in at least one of them there were some distinctly unpleasant brownish stains about which a horde of jungle insects buzzed and crowded.

The sun, coming above the high hills inland in a halo of crimson and gold, cast pale beams upon her. No smoke rose from her single stack, tilted at a crazy angle. No figures moved about her decks. A lantern, slung overside the night before to facilitate the unloading of Chinese coffins containing up-to-date firearms, still burned palely in the daylight. Here and there on the deck planking there was a patch of gaily colored cloth which represented a human being. All were motionless.

As the sunlight grew stronger and its rays became brighter and gave off a little warmth, the mists that hovered over the harbor were dissipated. The jungle stood out, darkly luxuriant and oddly menacing. The fever mists grew thin and disappeared, and showed the various heaps of ashes which had been the village of Solanda. Patches of cloth lay spread on the ground about them, too, and as the sun warmed them those patches stirred and rose and came shivering down to the water's edge, there to perform pious ablutions and immediately afterward curse the motionless steamer and all who remained on board of her.

On the steamer, likewise, the sun grew warmer and the patches of cloth stirred, and moved stiffly upright. They were men. They gazed ashore in a species of apathetic misery and clustered aimlessly about in little groups.

A black clad figure appeared on deck, the Reverend Peter Waring, heavy eyed from lack of sleep and hollow eyed from worry. He found the youngest Bromberg and could get neither comfort nor satisfaction from him. Meyer Bromberg had slept a little and dreamed much, feverishly, in which dreams he had lived over again the two nightmarish attacks that had been made on the steamer during the night. Gunflashes in the darkness and snarling dark figures trying to climb on board with glittering knives between their teeth. Frenzied fighting, hand to hand at last, before Captain Denny, magnificently drunk, launched two ship's boats on the unattacked side and came around to pour short range, repeating rifle fire into the attackers from behind. The youngest Bromberg could still hear the screams and uproar which had reechoed through his dreams.

But now, with Ethelda safe, at any rate for the moment, he was finding time to worry. What would Grandpapa Bromberg say? Marching off, leaving the business untended and its books exposed to looters' fires . . . And all for a girl whom it was unthinkable that Meyer should marry.

"I don't know," he was saying absently to a question the Reverend Peter Waring was repeating with a trace of impatience, "I—don't know," when Ethelda came into view.

The youngest Bromberg was smitten to silence by her appearance. He watched her in a desperate misery. She had never looked quite so radiant before. Her eyes were shining and she was smiling as if she had dreamed pleasantly. Young Bromberg, regarding her miserably, was moved to dream of valorous deeds—even the utter defiance of Grandpapa Bromberg.

"Where's Captain—what is his name?"

"I don't know," repeated the youngest Bromberg absently.

"Was he hurt?" asked Ethelda. "He wasn't, was he?"

Meyer Bromberg shook his head.

"Not that I know of. I didn't see him late. After the last attack, when you went to try to get some sleep in the mate's cabin I—" he flushed—"I lay down in front of your door. So I didn't see him."

What uneasy sleep had come to him had come while he lay on guard before her door. The Reverend Peter Waring nodded gratefully. Ethelda pinkened and smiled at him with a warmer regard than she had ever displayed before.

"Thank you, Meyer. But you needn't have worried. Father's people are quite trustworthy." She paused. "But Captain——"

"Denny," said the youngest Bromberg. "Captain Frederic Denny. He was chucked ashore from this ship yesterday, got very drunk and came to see me, and I thought he was crazy or worse. But after the Commandant put him in jail——"

Ethelda did not look shocked. She smiled and listened with eager interest. The Reverend Peter Waring frowned slightly, tiredly.

"I'd like to see him," he said rather discouragedly. "There must have been some white officers on the ship, but they've disappeared. Killed, I'm afraid."

The youngest Bromberg spread out his hands to signify that he knew nothing. He was looking at Ethelda.

"It's the engines," said Waring worriedly. "I have no talent for mechanics, but I can't see that they are harmed. I was thinking of trying to do something about the boilers and trying to start the engines. Possibly we could get the ship in motion when the tide rises to its highest and make our way along the coast. We don't know how extensive this uprising may be. But I know nothing about engines or boilers either."

"We need to hold a council of war," said Ethelda. "And of course we must include Captain Denny. I'll go look for him."

"And I must see about feeding the people," observed Waring tiredly. "When you find him, we'll talk."

Ethelda took the youngest Bromberg's arm as a precaution against the deck's slight tilt. They moved toward the stern. Here was the wreckage of the engine room hatch, the deadlights cracked by the heat of the steam that had been confined by them, bullet marks in the woodwork and at least one singularly unpleasant dark stain on the planking. The youngest Bromberg tried to steer Ethelda clear of it.

"It doesn't frighten me," she told him. "A missionary's daughter gets used to a lot of things. I've been trying to feel ashamed of having enjoyed last night."

"I didn't enjoy it," said Bromberg. He hadn't. Cold chills ran over him at the memory of some of the fighting he had been in. He had fought as savagely as the rest and, if he had to, he would fight as savagely again. But he hated it.

Ethelda laughed.

"I don't believe you," she told him comfortably. "I saw you on your knees in that doorway, shooting. Do you remember holding one man's wrist to keep him from killing you while you shot at another?"

He shuddered.

"That other man," he said, "had seen you behind me, inside the door."

There was a little silence.

"If you were a missionary's daughter," said Ethelda presently, "and all your life you'd listened to people worrying about other people's souls, and praying earnestly for other people, and spending their lives trying to do them good—you'd see how I felt last night. I like you better, Meyer, since I've seen you acting like a savage. I don't mean," she added painstakingly, "that I don't like missionaries and mission work. But I'm used to it. I'm not thrilled by it. But I'm not used to the way people act when they aren't thinking about other people's souls. So when I saw you and—Captain Denny fighting as you were fighting last night—" Her eyes were shining. "It was marvelous!"

They came upon Captain Denny suddenly, coming out of the cabin of the vanished captain of the *Rose of Achin* with his arms full of bottles. He looked seedy and strained, but he beamed at them.

"This chap did himself well, didn't he?" He indicated the bottles cheerfully.

"We want to have a council of war," Ethelda told him. "Of course, we need you."

"Presently," said Captain Denny. "As a matter of fact, I am at my best when in trouble, or when drunk. And at the moment I am neither."

He went blithely past them, bearing his burden of intoxicants. He vanished into the ship's galley. Ethelda smiled after him.

"He's—odd, isn't he? I don't think he was really in earnest about anything. Don't you think so too?"

A sudden searing suspicion came into the youngest Bromberg's head. He looked at Ethelda in a curious mixture of rage and despair.

"He's a beachcomber," he said harshly.

"I haven't bothered to think about him."

Ethelda nodded.

"You would think that," she said. "I wonder where he got his title of captain?"

The youngest Bromberg clenched his hands, but he followed as she moved to join her father. He paid no attention as father and daughter conferred crisply concerning the emergency facing them. There were nearly two hundred people on board the *Rose of Achin;* men, women, and children; villagers from Solanda and earnest converts who had come from miles around to hear the Reverend Peter Waring preach. They were packed belowdecks in every conceivable cubbyhole. The men had slept on deck because there was nowhere else for them to lie down. And besides, it had been still dubious whether Taku Umar might not make another attack on the stranded steamer before dawn.

THE first question was that of food. Ethelda rather impatiently suggested looking for rice in the cargo holds, and great bags of it were heaved on deck. It was set to cook after the Malay fashion, though in huge pots in the ship's galley instead of the myriad tiny fires the converts would have made, a fire for each little family group. The process was watched blandly by Captain Denny, sitting at ease with his bottles and a glass until he started up suddenly with a roar of wrath. Christopher fled ahead of a flying glass and Captain Denny tore an offending scrap of paper into a thousand bits and swore luridly.

"What happened?" asked Ethelda in a whisper.

"Christopher gave him a tract," said the youngest Bromberg. "He always does. Denny will kill him yet."

Ethelda chuckled even after Captain Denny had returned wrathfully to his bottles and his glass.

The sun soared upward into the sky. The early morning chill gave place to morning warmth, and morning warmth gave way to forenoon heat. The motionless *Rose of Achin* became a furnace. Belowdecks it was stifling, and the folk there came on deck gasping for air, only to approach suffocation from overcrowding. The *Rose of Achin* was not a big ship to begin with, and she had never been designed for comfort. There was barely room to stand on her sun-heated decks, and none at all to move about in. And within her hull she was like an oven.

Men began hauling buckets of water from overside and splashing them about the decks and upon each other. Ethelda found blankets and sheets and improvised an awning of sorts beneath which the youngest babies were sheltered. But it was a time of acute suffering, even for inhabitants of the seacoast of Sumatra. There was no shade. There were walls of metal to radiate a blistering glare. And there was not a breath of wind.

These things were discomforting. They were a trial, a persecution, for those on board the ship. But worse than physical suffering was the strain of utter inactivity, of waiting without knowing what they were waiting for.

Figures moved sullenly about the ashes of the village. A bivouac at least was in being. Perhaps an encampment. The forces of Taku Umar milled about in groups that grew into crowds and then drifted apart again. There was angry, disputatious discussion on shore. Men piled into the village boats and came out to look at the steamer. They paddled around her, shouting insults and promises of death by torture.

Once, when one of those boats drew near, there was a sudden crackling noise from aloft, the spitting crackle of half a dozen rifles being worked at top speed. Tiny splashes in the water all about the offending boat told of bullets being poured upon it. It made for the shore at a panic-stricken rate, settling in the water as it went in proof that some of the bullets had found their mark.

Silence again, except for the shuffling noise of the crowd. They were waiting, that was all. But no man could say for what. And on shore Taku Umar's men were waiting also. Not going away. Not making any threatening movement. But planning something. . . .

Once, those on the ship heard an inexplicable flurry of shots on shore.

The ship lying still upon a bank of mud and slowly baking in the sunlight, the fringe of dark jungle all about, and those sullen and vengeful specks that were Taku Umar's hillmen upon the shore—they were the only realities. The *Rose* *of Achin* was actually as remote from civilization and peace as if on another planet. She might remain upon this mud bank until the last of the refugees died of the harbor fevers without one word of her fate ever getting out. Her owner would not inquire for a long time, if he dared ever inquire for a ship which had been running guns for an insurrection. No other ships would ever come into Solanda harbor. *Prahus* and junks, trading timorously along the coast, might not poke their ungainly bows across the harbor bar for weeks or months.

And no word would pass along the land. Taku Umar held the single jungle path. Even if the Herr Commandant returned from his astute but futile trap and came toward Solanda with his not very bloodthirsty soldiers, Taku Umar could hold him back for a very long time. Fighting for his guns, as Taku Umar was, he could beat back a relieving force for weeks; at least until word went from Ujong Pasir by the infrequent mailboat of the *Koninklijke Paketvaart Maataskappij,* which is the Royal Netherlands Steam Packet Company, and a relieving force was gathered and outfitted with true Dutch deliberation, and landed, and until that force had marched deliberately into at least two ambushes and become thoroughly exasperated.

Then the *Rose of Achin* would be relieved. But in the meantime most of those on board her would die. And also in the meantime the news that Taku Umar had new and modern rifles for the taking would bring every loot-hungry man in Achin to his banner and there would be no lack of numbers with which to storm her.

When the council of war took place in the late forenoon, the gravity of the situation did not have to be pointed out.

CAPTAIN DENNY had reached what he considered a suitable stage of inebriation and reclined at ease upon the first mate's bunk, blinking amiably, while the Reverend Peter Waring, and the youngest Bromberg, and Ethelda, and Christopher, gathered in the stifling cubbyhole and looked at him with various expressions. Waring regarded him with a preoccupied worry. Young Bromberg eyed him with a bitter, envious hatred. Ethelda watched him with warm, anticipatory eyes. And Christopher blinked uneasily behind his spectacles.

He dismissed the idea of starting the engines, offhand.

"I am no mechanic," said Captain Denny. "The question is food. How long can we feed this mob?"

"On rice," said Waring worriedly, "for a month, I suppose. But there will be beri-beri. And all the children will be dead before then."

Captain Denny waved his hand, dismissing the matter.

"We can hold out for a month, then. I'll go up presently and give some more lessons in rifle shooting. I heard them firing just now, but no one came for me so I suppose it wasn't serious."

"And water—" began the Reverend Peter Waring, worriedly.

Captain Denny stared.

"I take it I am in command here," he observed coldly. "I will ask for information."

The youngest Bromberg snapped at him, raging.

"Don't be a fool! Nobody's in command! We're all working——"

Captain Denny glared wrathfully at him, his beak of a nose curiously prominent. But the youngest Bromberg was crazed by jealousy of the look Ethelda was bending upon Captain Denny, an admiring look, one which was full of thrilled anticipation. He was roused to recklessness. His hand tightened upon the revolver in his coat pocket and he said shrilly:

"We're asking for your advice, not your orders!"

And Captain Denny backed down gracefully, in the precise manner of a beachcomber who has presumed too far and repairs his error promptly.

"Oh, very well. What about the water?"

"It's nearly gone. Two hundred people drink a good deal, and the women have sponged off some of the children."

"We'll have to get some more," said Captain Denny comfortingly.

"And—how is this thing going to end?"

Captain Denny poured himself a glass without rising from a reclining position.

"I haven't the least idea," he said cheerfully. "It depends on the Herr Commandant, I suppose. He'll come and chase Taku Umar away, in time."

"He'll do nothing of the sort," said the youngest Bromberg angrily. "He's a fat-headed Dutch fool."

"I agree," conceded Captain Denny. He drained his glass. "Then we'll have to send him a message—if a messenger can get through."

"We might try a boat."

"There are plenty of dugouts on shore," pointed out Captain Denny without disturbance. "They were used to attack us last night. You may be sure they'd smother any boat we could send off. I don't think we could arm a small boat so it could get through. That will be the one thing Taku Umar will be watching out for."

There was a pause. The shuffling noise of the panting, heat-tortured people on deck came down. Somebody, driven below by the crowding of the deck, tried to sleep and moaned softly. Or maybe that was one of the wounded men from the night before. There was a persistent humming noise from all around the horizon; jungle insects, most likely, dancing joyously in the blistering sunlight. There was no breath of wind.

People drifted below, panting, driven by the sunlight into the ovenlike heat of the hull. There was the sound of voices talking exhaustedly in monosyllables, discussing despair. Captain Denny shook a bottle to hear it gurgle and beamed at his audience.

"You aren't worrying," said Ethelda in a tone which might have been admiration and might have been hope.

"I never do," said Captain Denny, "while I have food and drink."

"But aren't you—well—anxious about the outcome of this horrible business?"

"No," said Captain Denny in surprise. "I'm at least half drunk and the prospects are excellent for completing the job."

He poured himself another glass, delicately.

"Perhaps I should invite you to join me," he said cheerfully, "but the supply is limited."

The youngest Bromberg, still raging, snapped at him.

"We have too much self-respect to fill ourselves with drink while the lives of these people are in danger."

It was a distinctly smug remark, but he said it for Ethelda's ears. He was in a frenzy of jealousy of the warm look in her eyes as she looked at Captain Denny.

"Ah," said Captain Denny dispassionately. "You are respectable. I'm not. I haven't any self-respect. It interferes with things I want to do."

He tilted the glass comfortably to his lips.

Christopher made a sudden movement. Christopher was not impressive at that moment. He had never looked more as if his name should have been Soo Lin. Sweat was streaming down his yellow skin. He was small and skinny and his eyes were gogglelike behind their thick lenses. His lips were tensed in a frightened resolution.

"Rev'end Waring, sar," he said in what should have been a firm and steady voice, but was actually almost a squeak, "I will go to Ujong Pasir, sar. If you will write note to Commandant Van der Heyden, I will take it, sar."

CHRISTOPHER was scared. He was frightened by the bare thought of venturing on shore among Taku Umar's snarling little men. The Malays of Malaya proper have very unpleasant ways of killing persons they dislike, in times of internecine strife, but the Achin men of Sumatra are progressive after their fashion and have made marked improvements upon the older methods. Christopher could visualize himself subjected to unthinkable torment for the partial slaking of Taku Umar's thirst for vengeance upon the folk on the *Rose of Achin*. The *tuds* would begin it; a simple device of two timbers, whereby they would demand of him fullest information concerning all that went on on board the ship. And after he had screamed out all things that might interest them and his thighs were broken so he could no longer be tormented in that way, they would gain some further pleasure from watching him as a bamboo shoot grew slowly through his body. The worst part of that particular form of execution is that a man does not die for three days and sometimes four. But he has been reduced to a gibbering idiot long before that time from sheer agony.

Yes, Christopher was frightened. He was shaking as if with the ague in the ovenlike small cabin on the roasting *Rose of Achin*. His hands were clenched tightly, desperately. But he repeated:

"I—I will take it, sar."

The Reverend Peter Waring frowned tiredly.

"I'd have no chance of getting through," he said heavily, "and besides, my people would go into a panic if I left——"

He paused.

"It's suicide!" said the youngest Bromberg desperately, and perhaps a little defensively. "It is, sir."

"Yes," agreed Waring. "It is."

"If you're waiting for me to volunteer," said Captain Denny calmly, "I won't do it. I am quite comfortable here."

Ethelda's eyes clouded for an instant. Then she said quickly:

"Christopher really has the best chance of getting through."

Christopher nodded, swallowing with some difficulty.

"Yes, I have best chance. I will go along beach, not by trail. But I cannot swim . . ."

Captain Denny looked up, beaming.

"We'll raid the shore," he said blithely. "For water. We need to, anyway. And we'll drop you ashore as we raid. To-night, of course, before they've thought of attacking us here."

Christopher shivered, and nodded again.

"Yes. I—" He swallowed again. "I will go and—and pray until it is time."

He turned to go out of the cabin. His eyes, fear-stricken behind his spectacles, sought out the Reverend Peter Waring. And at the unhappy smile he received he seemed to straighten up a little. But even so, he stumbled once as he padded away from the cabin.

"He's a hero," said Waring slowly. "He makes me feel ashamed."

"It's suicide!" said the youngest Bromberg desperately. "It's nothing but suicide!"

Captain Denny coaxed a last drop from his glass and said amiably:

"I'm not ashamed. I haven't any shame. I'm past all that. I think I'll go to sleep."

He rolled over on the bunk he had been reclining on and settled himself comfortably. The youngest Bromberg clenched and unclenched his hands. He waited doggedly for Ethelda to leave before him. She did go out, smiling a little to herself.

THE *Rose of Achin* remained immobile on the mud bank, tilted a little by the tide, a target for the full rays of the equatorial sun in a dead calm. She seemed to waver in the heat, which was choking, which was monstrous. She was packed full of sweating, racked humanity. She was already a hospital with wounded men from the night before. Overcrowded as she was, she would be a pest house before long.

There was activity on shore and the sound of axes falling. Something was in train, something which was not inspired by fraternal affection for the folk on board the steamer. But nobody could see where the axes were being wielded, and nobody could guess what the object might be.

During the afternoon small parties of Taku Umar's men were ferried over to the two points of land which nearly closed in Teluk Solanda. To watch, of course, lest any attempt be made to send a ship's boat through the narrow exit from the harbor. Even with gaspipe guns and old flintlocks they could sink any small boat that tried to make the passage.

Young Bromberg shook his head helplessly when Ethelda pointed out the guard parties going to the tiny capes.

"It's suicide to try to get through," he said unhappily. "And you know what Taku Umar would do to a prisoner."

"Father thinks the boilers are punctured with a bullet hole," said Ethelda. "I can't help wondering if we couldn't mend them somehow."

Bromberg shrugged. He had that marvelous mechanical ineptitude which is only possible in persons who have lived all their lives in a mechanized environment.

"I coundn't mend a fountain pen," he said dismally, "much less a steamer."

Ethelda rubbed her lip with her finger, thoughtfully.

"I believe Captain Denny could fix them if he'd try," she said suddenly.

"He doesn't care," said the youngest Bromberg bitterly.

Ethelda laughed.

"No, he doesn't care. Isn't it marvelous how indifferent he is to everything? I don't believe he knows what fear is."

"Neither does a hog," said the youngest Bromberg savagely.

"Meyer!" Ethelda stared at him.

"I mean it!" he said wildly. "I know

his sort. I've seen them before. I hate them, every one. They're bland, and they're charming to talk to and they're worthless. Denny would betray every one of us if it suited his convenience, but he's a hero because he doesn't happen to be afraid! And I do get afraid. I was worse frightened than Christopher in the fighting last night, and when the next fighting comes I'll be afraid again. But I'll fight, just the same, and if he got frightened he'd run away! And I can work, and struggle, and I can die loving you—and he comes along and in three minutes you care more for him than I've been able to make you care for me in six months!"

Ethelda flushed. But no woman is ever very much insulted by any man who is telling her credibly that he loves her.

"But Meyer—"

"What do I care about these Malays?" demanded the youngest Bromberg rather shrilly. "I came here to save you. These men and their women and children could die and go to hell without disturbing me! I came to warn you of your danger and try to get you away. I didn't care about anyone but you. But Denny—. He doesn't care about anyone but himself! And I've seen you look at him——"

"Meyer!" Ethelda tried to look angry. Instead, she looked frightened. "That isn't fair! It isn't just——"

"But it's true!" The youngest Bromberg looked very young indeed, and rather pitiful besides, except for a strident anger which possessed him. "His kind was made for fighting. They're good for nothing else. But you saw him try to face me down, appointing himself to command of all of us, and you saw him swallow his words when I wouldn't let him do it. I'm as good a man as he is. A better one, if I say it myself. But you look at him——"

"Please!" Ethelda was staring at him queerly. She was oddly pale. She managed to force a rather quavery smile. "I—like you, Meyer. I'm not even angry with you for what you've said. But you've been making me see something I was trying not to realize. And—I'm frightened!"

She looked it. She turned to gaze over the rail toward the tall green jungle that came everywhere down to the water's edge, and looked so cool and inviting, and was actually so deadly. Her lips quivered, and she looked genuinely scared.

"You love him?" demanded the youngest Bromberg harshly.

Ethelda smiled the same rather quavery smile.

"I—I'm afraid I do, Meyer."

The youngest Bromberg wrung his hands.

And so, when he clambered down into one of the two ship's boats that were to make the raid for water shortly after sundown, his eyes were burning with hatred of the blithe and carefree and genially intoxicated Captain Denny.

THE sun had sunk half an hour since. The brief tropical twilight was ended and all the world was blanketed by a soft warm darkness through which infinitely bright small stars stabbed their rays. There was still no breath of wind. The water was like oil. The little wavelets that were the attenuated remnants of the swell outside the harbor bore on their rounded crests the dancing images of the constellations. They made soft little slapping noises as they beat against the *Rose of Achin's* rusty hull.

It was one of those curious moments when the world that is normally a background for a man's thoughts thrusts all thoughts aside and takes over his whole consciousness. The air was hot and still, but curiously full of the smell of green, growing things mingled with the salt tang of the sea. Flapping moths, incredibly huge, fluttered their wings in almost audible beats over the waters of the bay. The two boats, with their trailing tows of water casks, rocked and lurched as each new barefooted man slipped quietly down into them.

Up on deck, that monotonous humming that every crowd makes, everywhere, was going on. With even the slight relief that the sinking of the sun had given, the folk belowdecks had come up, panting, to suffer in the outside darkness rather than in the horrible closeness down below. They lined the rail, watching the preparations for the water raid until the Reverend Peter Waring drew them away and set them to work singing a hymn. He would work from that into a prayer meeting, and in the course of the prayer meeting there would be petitions for the success of the raid, and the safety of Christopher, and for the relief of the *Rose of Achin*. All of which, of course, might or might not have a direct effect upon the plans of the deity to whom the prayers were addressed, but would assuredly contribute indirectly to the objects prayed for.

The hymn with its rather wailing tune would cover the noise of the boats moving away from the *Rose of Achin's* side, each one with a long raft of empty casks behind it. And while the Reverend Peter Waring's voice rolled forth across the water in prayer or boomed in his pulpit delivery, the attention of the hillmen on shore would be focused on the ship. There would be no thought of boats, loaded with a choice selection of the unregenerate on board and led by Captain Frederick Denny, streaking it across the harbor to land a scared messenger for Ujong Pasir and fill water casks with fluid. In strict justice to Waring, it should be admitted that he had not thought of that angle of the situation. But it worked out very nicely.

The youngest Bromberg, in the second boat with Christopher and a band of unashamed heathen, was in a fever of anxiety to get back to the ship. Ethelda had been left on board, and though the little sentry from Ujong Pasir had been pulled out of a ventilator that morning and had spent the day in the middle of a fascinated group, showing them how to work the rifles out of the Chinese coffins, Bromberg was by no means sure that they could beat off an attack from the shore in the absence of so many of the fighting men.

The oars were muffled. Your Malay, everywhere, is an instinctive seaman and a still more instinctive conspirator, and that had been done without orders. Eight little men to a boat, each man with his loaded rifle beside him, they pulled with a surprising quietness and speed across the oily harbor water. The youngest Bromberg, white faced and desperate in the stern, felt Christopher shivering by his side.

Christopher had abandoned the flapping white garments he had worn for heavy blue dungarees found in the crew's quarters. They would be less conspicuous at night and the thickness of their material would protect him to some extent against thorns and undergrowth. He had a heavy *golôk,* a wood knife, in his belt, an antiquated revolver in his pocket, and a letter to the Herr Commandant tied about his neck.

The starlight glinted upon his spectacles. His hands were clenched tightly, and his lips were moving all the way to the shore. The youngest Bromberg heard some of his whisperings, and even in the preoccupation of his wrath and despair, he found time to wonder drearily if such *clichés,* such stale and outworn phrasings, could enlist the direct attention of an intelligent deity. But at the same time Bromberg found himself capable of an envious admiration for Christopher.

The jungle loomed up darkly overhead, showing itself mostly by the blotting out of many stars. A dank mist seemed to spread out slowly from its base, creeping out over the water. Into that mist the two ship's boats slipped quietly. They went on until there was a slight, barely perceptible jar ahead. The oarsmen of the second boat slackened speed and it beached very gently in the mud at the jungle's edge.

There was a little splashing, and Captain Denny loomed up over the side, wading in the water.

"All safe," he whispered cheerfully. "Here you go ashore, Christopher, my boy."

The thin and reedy singing on the *Rose of Achin* came faintly to their ears. There were infinitely small rustlings and tiny drippings in the jungle. There were the noises of the harbor waves lapping at the edge of the shore.

Christopher stood up trembling. The youngest Bromberg gave him his hand as he stepped over the side of the boat into the water.

"God bless you, sar, and all on board ship," quavered Christopher. His voice broke in a squeak. He stumbled toward the shore and paused. "Sar. Captain Denny." They could hear him shaking from pure terror. "I go as dying man. As dying man I ask favor, sar. Read these."

There was a little rustling of paper. Christopher splashed on shore. They heard small crashings in the thick undergrowth.

"Back off," ordered Captain Denny in a low tone. The two boats backed water and were clear, the singing from the ship still coming faintly across the harbor. That singing came to a close and they heard a faint mutter, a man's voice, too far away for the words to be distinguished but by the intonation the Reverend Peter Waring praying with his flock.

The two boats moved along the shore, headed for the spot where the shallow, unnavigable stream from the hills poured its waters into the harbor. The muffled oars fell into a rythmic stroke. The water casks towing behind made a little hissing noise.

The youngest Bromberg heard a ripping sound, and Captain Denny finished tearing something into bits and swore.

"Blasted tracts!"

This time, for once, he swore softly and with something other than wrath.

There was only the noise of the oars, very faint, and of the jungle, fainter still, and the disconnected, muted murmur of a man's voice coming from the distant *Rose of Achin.*

Whispers came out of the mist from the boat ahead. The youngest Bromberg steered to the right and followed. The jungle rose skyward once more, very, very high and straight. Then it seemed to close overhead.

Captain Denny's voice was heard, in a hoarse whisper:

"The water's fresh here."

The youngest Bromberg dipped his finger overside and tasted it. The oarsmen were resting on their oars. He hauled the tow of water casks alongside and began to pull out the bungs, very carefully putting each one in his pocket for preservation. The casks had been nailed together and when the last bung was out he rolled them over, bunghole under. They began to fill, with bubbling, gurgling noises. Up ahead he heard similar sounds.

Stillness. Quietness. The soft rustling of the leaves overhead and the infinitely faint burbling noise of the water. No other sound in all the world. . . .

The youngest Bromberg felt a movement in his boat. Then another, He heard little clicks. The eight little oarsmen had heard something that even young Bromberg's desperately listening ears had missed and were getting their rifles in readiness.

Then a voice, a white man's voice, screamed from the shore.

"Look out! You in the boats! They're coming!"

It was a horrible sort of scream. There was agony in it, and horror beyond imagining. The hair prickled along the youngest Bromberg's scalp at the sound of it. And then a gun flashed on shore and there was a larger flash, and immediately afterwards another from behind, and sheets of flame began to lick upward from two great pyres of shredded resinous wood on opposite sides of the stream.

THE youngest Bromberg, in an agonized preoccupation, was twirling the water casks back upright and fitting the bungs in place with hands that shook outrageously. He finished the task in an amazingly short time, though his spine felt like ice. He did not even look up when the vicious crackling of guns in his own boat told him that his little boatmen were flinging lead into the jungle on either side.

When the last keg was plugged he said harshly,

"All ready!" forgetting that the English words would not be understood. The rifle fire went on, the barking detonations deafening from so short a distance.

And then he saw Captain Denny standing upright in the sternsheets of his boat, laughing as he emptied his revolver, as he reloaded it, and as he emptied it again at the flashes from the stream's edge. Captain Denny was outlined by the light from the huge pyres of flame. They had been, of course, beacons laid and prepared with a flaring kindling of native-made gunpowder. When a firearm of any sort was fired into the mass, it caught with a roar and went up in vivid illumination. Achin has fought too often, and too long, not to have some equivalent of the more civilized magnetism flare.

Bromberg ground his teeth in a raging envy. Captain Denny was enjoying himself, laughing as he barked orders to his oarsmen and got his boat headed around for the harbor again, and fired coolly at the flashes from the shore. The shore guns were black powder weapons, every one, and they made a din and smoke out of all proportion to their deadliness. And at that, most of the firearms Taku Umar's force possessed must have been posted in that ambush. Bromberg hated Captain Denny with a corrosive hatred for his lack of fear while he, himself, felt every pore of his skin crawling with horror of the bullets that flew overhead and all about him, and now and then plunked into the woodwork of the boat.

He cursed venomously under his breath in an almost hysterical rage. The head of his boat was coming slowly around. And then the light of the flares showed him something else, a white man on shore, tied to a slender jungle trunk where the undergrowth was cut back a space, and about him certain appliances of torment that no white man in Sumatra has not heard about.

The white man was shouting hoarsely, his features twisted in agonized appeal. The roaring of guns and the shouting from the men in ambush drowned out most of his cry, but the youngest Bromberg caught disconnected words, screamed hoarsely above the din.

"Shoot me! For God's sake, shoot . . ."

The youngest Bromberg felt every separate hair upon his head stand upright. The ice that seemed laid upon his spine spread suddenly until his every member was numb as with cold. And then he was up, crying shrill orders he could never afterward remember. His memory of those next few moments was always confused. He remembered himself casting loose the water casks with hands that were unbelievably steady. He remembered grabbing frantically over the side for the long line of kegs that trailed behind Captain Denny's boat and hooking his own line to the other with a strange, incredible swiftness.

And then he remembered swinging the bow of his own boat for the shore, and cursing between sobs of pity for himself, and of leaping from the bow—he never remembered leaving the stern—and falling with a crash half in and half out of the mud at the water's edge. Then his revolver was going off in the face of a man who tried to scream, and could not, as the flame seared his face, and then the youngest Bromberg, quite out of his head, was plunging crazily onward.

A terrific uproar broke out behind him. Your Malay is not by Western standards an extraordinarily courageous individual, but like white men he is subject to that contagious insanity which men call bravery. A *sorak* pealed out, the wild and ululating choric shout with which the Malay, be he never so good a Christian, prefaces all stirring action from a hunt to a homicide. And eight little oarsmen were tumbling ashore in a ridiculous lust for battle, their rifles crackling at the shortest of short range. With repeating rifles such as theirs they were the equals of four times their number armed with the gaspipe weapons of the Achinese, or only with spear and *kris*.

They broke through to Bromberg as he was fumbling at the bonds of the white man bound to the tree. One of them slashed at the rattan cordage and the white man fell into the youngest Bromberg's arms.

But though with repeating rifles the little Malays of the *Rose of Achin* were a match for four times their number, they were not a match for eight times their number, and assuredly not for ten or twelve. And from the instant of their valorous dash into the underbrush after Bromberg, every Achin man who could interpret the yells of close combat had been racing toward that spot in bloodthirsty anticipation.

The flares mounted momentarily higher. The foliage of the jungle was tinted carmine by their blazing, and the battle was a screaming uproar beneath a roof of ruddy leaves, gun-flashes splitting the lower shadows and explosions that were reechoed a myriad times by tree trunks racking the ear drums of the combatants.

A little Malay went down, coughing, into the dense shadow of a fiercely growing creeper. A second spun about dizzily, clinging desperately to his rifle but with only one arm in condition to fire it. Something seared Bromberg's ribs. He sobbed, and began to shoot. . . .

Then, with a roar, fresh rifles began to rake the undergrowth. There was a shouting and yelling and Captain Denny came dancing into the middle of the fighting; carmine-tinted by the firelight and roaring orders and profanity indiscriminately. He pointed to the boats and bellowed instructions, and defiance to the universe. The youngest Bromberg staggered back upon his trail, the unknown white man across his shoulders. And Captain Denny picked up the coughing little Malay and his rifle together and came bounding after, bellowing orders that turned an indiscriminate scrimmage into a very well conducted retreat.

Young Bromberg came out of his daze as he dumped the rescued man into the boat. His brain began to function with a snap. He jerked his men into their places, drew off a dozen paces from shore, and shrilly ordered them to unship their oars and burn up the edge of the jungle with rifle fire. He was still afraid, horribly afraid, but in addition to his fear there was a tingling all over his body, now, that kept his head savagely cool.

Captain Denny pushed off his own boat himself and stood by the bow cursing luridly as his boatmen backed down to it, shooting as fast as their rifles could be worked, and then jumped in and rowed like fiends toward the ring of darkness beyond the fires.

The youngest Bromberg found himself acting upon the cue as if a professional fighting man. His own boat swung around and darted for darkness. It bumped into something with a sudden shock, and the firelight glinted upon wet staves. When it went on again the loose water casks were being towed soggily behind it.

SCREAMS of rage followed the two boats as they went at top speed for the ship. Dugouts would be coming to the watering place, headed for the sound of fighting. They might be fought through, but there had been losses enough. The little men pulled desperately at the oars.

And the *Rose of Achin* appeared as a darker blur against the star-dotted harbor waves. Captain Denny's boat slowed up, and Bromberg's drew alongside.

"You're a damned fool," said Captain Denny conversationally. "You made us lose the water casks. I had to cut them loose to come after you."

"The hell we did," said the youngest Bromberg savagely. "I picked them up!" He paused an instant, to drive himself to say the next thing. "I suppose I ought to thank you for helping."

"I saved your lives," Captain Denny told him coolly, "but not out of love for you, my dear fellow. Your men had no end of rifle cartridges on them. And Taku Umar has a few cases of guns on shore without shells. He'd have been able to stage a really first class attack if he'd gotten the shells your men carried. And even if only one of your men had been left behind, his couple of hundred shells would make it pretty unpleasant for us with a marksman on shore."

The boats went on, side by side. The *Rose of Achin* drew nearer.

"Who was that white man?"

"I don't know," said Bromberg shortly. He was beginning to feel the reaction from the fury of the fighting. He felt cold and shivery and he was suddenly aware that he wanted passionately to be sick.

There came a hail from the deck of the *Rose of Achin*. It was the Reverend Peter Waring's voice, strained and harsh.

"Who's that?"

"Us," said Captain Denny—and the youngest Bromberg felt a surge of rage, despite his nausea, at Denny's total lack of nerves and his consequent appearance of sublime courage.

"What happened?"

"We were attacked," said Captain Denny cheerfully, "and we beat them off. Brought off a white man, too, who'd been Taku Umar's prisoner. And of course we filled the water casks."

A murmur ran over the deck of the steamer among all the little people there who had listened to the firing, in which two out of the three white men and sixteen fighting men had been engaged. There had been rather terrible fear on the *Rose of Achin* while that fighting went on. Sixteen men and the white *tuan* who swore so terribly and fought so well—that was Denny, of course—would have been a terrific loss to the refugees. If the two boats had been cut off, the very backbone of the steamer's defense would have been shattered. And water brought on board. . . .

An earnest convert somewhere on the deck started quaveringly to sing. And the Doxology rose rather thinly and rather spottily, and perhaps a little bit squeakily, to the stars as the boats made fast below. When the last Malay words had died away, a hymn of fervent thanksgiving was set up. And all this was very natural, and possibly quite touching, but the youngest Bromberg lost his nausea in a flaring rage at the time lost in hoisting three wounded men to the deck and attention, and in getting the white man he had cut loose to some sort of comfort.

That sickness came back, though, a little later when the white man had had nearly half of one of Captain Denny's bottles poured into him and was fit to be questioned.

His legs were broken, both of them, by the *tuds,* and in the reaction of his escape he was nothing but a bunch of shattered nerves. He fainted mercifully when his leg bones were set, and his teeth chattered hideously when he tried to talk later on. In the hot little candle-lit cabin where he lay, he was pitiful to look at. And the youngest Bromberg never liked to remember the details of what he told them.

He had been second mate of the steamer, and when the *Rose of Achin* was rushed by the panic-stricken converts he had thought them raiders or pirates or worse. And then when the boilers went off with a thunderous roar, he went overboard with the rest of the crew. Believing that piracy was the least of the mob's intentions, he had made for the shore, had hidden from sight, and ducked into the jungle at the first opportunity.

With a revolver but no wood knife the jungle was impassable. He lay low, thirsty and frightened, while the drama of the two night attacks on the steamer played itself out and sunrise showed the ship stranded on the mudbank. Gradually, he worked out an explanation something like the true state of affairs. It was his intention to try to steal a dugout and make the *Rose of Achin* after sundown. But before then. . . .

Putting it delicately as possible, he saw the other three white officers furnishing entertainment for Taku Umar's followers. They were being killed by small bamboo shoots being made to grow through their bodies, tearing viscera and shredding nerves with a horrible deliberation. It was Taku Umar's especial order. Your Oriental princeling is apt to be vengeful at any time. When he is an ex-royal princeling fighting for his throne again, and has lost the guns that gave him his best chance to regain it, he is apt to be particularly unpleasant to everybody, and especially to those who had, however innocent, a part in his loss.

The second mate of the *Rose of Achin* could not stand it.

"I—thought," he stammered, "I th-thought I could sh-shoot myself afterward, b-before th-they got me."

He broke out of the jungle and shot his three friends as an act of sheer mercy, before a spear went through his forearm and his pistol dropped. He was buried under a swarming mass of brown humanity before he could get it again.

And then . . . The youngest Bromberg gagged at the babbled relation.

"Th-they were laying an ambush," the second mate chattered, "a-and they th-thought they'd b-broken my spirit. If—if you chaps didn't c-come into it I was to c-call you. That p-prince chap who's running the show, he p-promised me he'd have me shot if I g-got you chaps in the trap. But if I didn't he p-promised me he'd——"

The second mate went abruptly off to sleep, twitching, in the midst of horrors.

ETHELDA was deathly white. Her father's eyes were burning strangely. The youngest Bromberg was frankly ill. Only Captain Denny seemed unperturbed, and even he looked grave.

He poured himself a drink from the bottle that had been brought in for the mate. He drank it meditatively and twirled the glass idly in his hand.

"I think," he said pleasantly, "I did a very sensible thing in not volunteering to take a message through to the Commandant."

The youngest Bromberg turned upon him wildly.

"By God," he panted shrilly, "if Christopher doesn't get through I'll kill you myself!"

Captain Denny stared coldly at him.

"I wouldn't try it if I were you," he said.

The youngest Bromberg made an arrested, raging gesture.

"You can't bluff me," he cried. "You can't bluff me! You aren't afraid, maybe, but you don't want me to try. Because if I try, you know I'll do it, even with a bullet through my heart first!"

Captain Denny started up angrily. The youngest Bromberg snatched out the revolver he always held close. But he was aware of a savage, bitter scorn.

"Trying to bluff again," he said with a sob of rage. "You won't try to get out your gun, because you know I'll kill you. You just try to bluff that you're going to in hopes I'll back down. But I won't!"

Captain Denny smiled.

"All right," he said amiably, "but I think you're a damned fool to quarrel with me when I've just saved your life. You might need me to save it again."

He strolled out of the cabin, negligently carrying the bottle that had been brought in for the mate.

The mate slept on, twitching and moaning and uttering little cries in his sleep. The Reverend Peter Waring watched him.

"It may be," he said slowly, "that this man knows engines. Otherwise it would seem that a merciful God would have let him die before enduring what he has suffered."

The youngest Bromberg said nothing. He felt Ethelda's eyes upon him. She was looking at him in a peculiar mixture of anger and curiosity. He understood it well enough, and it was gall and wormwood. She was angry because he had defied Denny. She was curious about Denny's reminder of having saved his life.

He went savagely out of the cabin, his eyes blinded by inexplicable tears, which might have been of rage and might have been merely fretted nerves, and might have been any of any number of things. He went stumbling up the companionway and out into the blessed darkness. The deck was nearly empty of people, now. Two or three little groups of still and silent figures—men sleeping in the open because there was no room for them below, and because there might yet be an attack at any time. The rest was stillness and quiet.

He stumbled to the rail and leaned against it, fighting off an impulse to sob hysterically. A very young man who loves a girl who does not love him at all is in a precarious emotional state at best. When he beholds her fascinated by a man he not only hates but despises—and yet envies—his state of mind is more unstable still. And the youngest Bromberg was nerve-racked by the fighting he had gone through and the second mate's babbled story of torture. . . .

He leaned over the rail.

His foot slipped on the deck planking.

He caught himself, his nerves aquiver. The sole of his shoe was still sticky and slippery. Then he saw something he had not noticed before. One of the sprawled-out figures of men asleep lay close by where his foot had slipped.

The youngest Bromberg went suddenly cold all over. He reached down . . . touched the man . . . rolled him over . . . He stood up with all his veins like ice. He had killed men, no doubt, in the two nights' fighting. But he had not ever happened to touch a dead man before in all his life.

HE SUDDENLY realized that he was crouched down with his revolver in his hand and his ears strained, listening. There was absolutely no sound but the sleepy murmur from below, made by those people who were not yet slumbering, and the lazy little slappings of the harbor waves against the rusty sides of the *Rose of Achin,* and the vague and indefinite noises from the jungle.

He waited for what seemed an æon. No figures moved anywhere. But if Taku Umar's hillmen had managed to get a foothold on deck, they would not keep silence. They would not need to. They would be beginning their work of murder and rapine with yells of joy. Yet here was a dead man. . . .

The youngest Bromberg slipped soundlessly across the deck. Three figures, close together, lay in the relaxed attitudes of sleeping men. The youngest Bromberg spoke softly. There was no answer. He touched the first, and his teeth began to chatter. The second; the third——

Then he heard a languid, conversational voice above. Half a dozen men were posted on the *Rose of Achin's* upper works. They were armed and were supposed to be watchful. The voice proved that they were alive. And the murmur from belowdecks was proof that so far no killings had taken place there.

There were four dead men on the decks—knifed. No alarm, no disturbance, no yells of triumph from the murderer.

One man, perhaps, and certainly not more than two or three, had somehow managed to board the ship. They had mounted, perhaps, by the boat falls left dangling in the water.

The youngest Bromberg became filled with a sudden cold panic and darted to the deckhouse. Inside——

"I think," Ethelda was saying aggrievedly to her father, down below, "I think Meyer isn't being even decent to

Captain Denny. He's a beachcomber, of course, but if he were helped, instead of being sneered at——"

The youngest Bromberg felt a surge of thanksgiving flow over him that even obliterated the meaning of the words. Ethelda was safe—so far, anyhow.

He darted down the companionway, put his head in the cabin door, and whispered half a dozen words that turned Ethelda dead white and the Reverend Peter Waring into a pale but resolute fighting man, then flashed up to the deck again.

He came out without a sound. He went scouting desperately, noiselessly. And suddenly he saw a dark blur against the rail where no dark blur ought to be. He crept toward it. It was a man, stripped and with his skin glistening with oil, lowering something with infinite caution over the rail.

The youngest Bromberg's revolver came up. The breath was whistling through his nostrils. And the man by the rail turned. He saw Bromberg's figure menacing him, on the instant loosed his cord and sprang forward with a knife—and Bromberg shot him.

The echoes of the shot had not died away when the swirling of water from paddles dashed desperately into it told of at least one dugout overside. The remaining five bullets in the youngest Bromberg's revolver went after it, but without hope and apparently without effect.

The man who still kicked feebly on the deck could have had but one motive in raiding the steamer alone, and assuredly there was but one thing precious enough to be lowered with such infinite care over the steamer's side. Shells for the modern rifles which had been landed on the wharf. Shells with which to make those rifles effective, to make a storming party equal in armament to the defenders of the ship, as the shore men were already vastly superior in numbers.

"Only God knows," said the Reverend Peter Waring grimly, when the ship had been turned upside down in a search for more marauders, "how many cartridges were loaded into that dugout. We can't even guess."

"I suppose," said Captain Denny blithely, "we'd better get ready to repel boarders. Some barricades on the deck would be useful. And we'd better get lights ready. Darkness would favor them."

"The men on watch weren't watching," said the youngest Bromberg harshly, "or they'd have seen him in time. If I hadn't shot that man we'd have been taken by surprise when they heard how careless we were."

"Too late to worry now." Captain Denny shrugged. "I'll go up and start work on the barricades."

He moved toward the companionway. Ethelda stirred.

"Can I help you?" she asked, almost timidly.

"No," said Captain Denny indifferently. "Stay below and keep the women quiet."

Ethelda subsided. Bromberg saw her eyes, warm and comforted, follow Denny's tall spare figure through the door and up the companionway. When a woman has lived all her life officially deferred to and sheltered, and actually expected to work as hard as a man—and any missionary's wife or daughter will recognize that status—it is at least a novelty to be neither deferred to nor expected to be useful.

Noises began on deck, and Captain Denny's voice upraised in genially profane commands. Ethelda, listening, smiled secretively at some inner thought. The youngest Bromberg nodded wearily to himself and went heavily above to help in the work.

Lanterns were strung over the side to throw a light upon the water. Men were hauling up rice bags for barricades and piling coal against doors and openings and closing portholes with what ingenious contrivances of beams and cargo cases they could manufacture.

THEY worked feverishly, while the women wailed affrightedly below. There had to be light to do the work by, and every man had to have a rifle by his hand. And also, there had to be men watching and listening. The work went slowly.

It was about an hour from the time of the discovery that shells had been stolen, when bullets began to whizz through the air and land upon the deck of the ship. Just about half a dozen rifles were working at a relatively short range. Men who were apparently marksmen seemed to have some solid platform not more than four hundred yards from the steamer, and they worked their guns at leisure and with some accuracy.

Two men were down and one killed, while three others had minor scratches, before those on the deck gave over their building of buttresses and fortifications against the superstructure. The deck lanterns had to be doused. Thick obscurity fell upon the steamer save for the lanterns that hung over her side. And in that obscurity men sweated and tugged, still dragging bags of rice and other cargo to strengthen weak points in the defense. And the whole ship settled down into a tense and rather horrible expectancy.

At any minute the flickering lanterns might disclose dugouts dashing madly for the ship's side, armed this time with weapons equal to the defenders' own. Then there would come the most terrific fighting of all. And the probabilities of a successful defense were not great.

From time to time, leisurely, a rifle would crack off in the darkness some four hundred yards away. Some solid platform there housed riflemen. A bullet would whine overhead or strike woodwork or barricade with a brittle crashing sound. And the folk on the *Rose of Achin* waited with frayed and tattered nerves for the assault.

Time passed with incredible slowness. The steady, dropping fire kept up interminably. At every instant it seemed that the next would show the decks covered with shooting, stabbing figures appearing as if materialized from the sky. And then it seemed that the next instant it *must* happen. . . .

But the sun was rising incredibly upon the unattacked *Rose of Achin* when the rifle fire suddenly increased. The dawn-light had showed the source of that fire. A raft, which must have been made previously, was anchored within easy rifle shot of the ship with a barricade of rough logs to shelter the marksmen. They were ignoring the ship now, however. They were pouring a heavy fire upon the water near the ship.

At Captain Denny's bellowed command, a hail of bullets was flung at the raft. A respectable din of musketry arose, the tense nerves of the defenders finding some easement in the action. And young Bromberg flung a rope to a dim figure swimming weakly toward the ship, its arms upheld by two short logs. It was Christopher, weak and gasping, who was hauled up to the deck.

He was stripped to flapping white drawers and his body was torn by thorns. He stood rocking on his feet before the Reverend Peter Waring and sobbed.

"Sar," he sobbed, "Commandant say he will not come! Achin men are round Ujong Pasir, sar, and if he march out they will kill everybody in it. Rev'end Waring, sar, the Commandant will not come!"

And then someone pointed to the shore. The sound of axes heard more or less distinctly all the previous day was explained. And with the explanation the last hope of the *Rose of Achin's* successful defense was shattered. Taku Umar had been building rafts, one of which had been poled out to harass the ship with rifle fire, the night before. It was evident that relatively few shells had been taken off by the midnight marauder before he was killed. These rafts, however, made good the deficiency of shells.

Each one contained a bullet-proof palisade of logs, and they were being poled slowly along the shore and made fast in a long, irregular line. With the outgoing tide they would be swept toward the grounded *Rose of Achin*. They would foul her. And Taku Umar could throw his whole force into an attack, instead of being limited to the number the village dugouts would carry. With six to seven hundred men he could beat down any resistance from the thirty-odd fighters on board the ship, short of machine gun fire. And there were no machine guns.

When the rafts fouled the stranded steamer, it would simply be a matter of the refugees exacting as high a price as possible for their own lives and the honor of their women and children.

The rafts were ranged in line and waited for the tide to turn.

CHAPTER IV

THE SAVING TIDE

THE Reverend Peter Waring gazed toward the line of rafts against the shore. It was a depressing sight.

"It will be an hour or less," he said steadily, "before the tide turns. Another half hour, perhaps, before the rafts encircle the ship. Then we die."

The youngest Bromberg, hollow eyed from a night of strain, looked at Ethelda. His eyes burned.

"She—" he choked. "I won't let her be taken—alive."

Ethelda was queerly pale.

"Thank you, Meyer," she said very quietly. "I'll count on that."

They watched the rafts in silence. Long black streaks on the oily water, with heaped-up logs making the roughest of shelters on each one. Lying sluggishly in the glassy harbor, breaking up the reflection of the palm trees at the water's edge.

"Damn the Commandant!" said Bromberg desperately. "He could have tried, anyway."

But the Herr Commandant was acting exactly as anybody else would have done. He was thickheaded beyond question, and he was obstinate past a doubt, but he was not altogether a fool. There was a tidy force of hillmen hovering about Ujong Pasir. The bolder spirits of the countryside were rallying about Taku Umar on his promise of guns, and half Achin only waited to be sure before it, too, went out in joyous rebellion. If the Herr Commandant marched out to relieve the *Rose of Achin*, he would be ambushed before he had gone half a mile. He had a rather unimportant force of not very bloodthirsty soldiers. Fighting a way through six miles of jungle path against several times their number, and with a pitched battle waiting at the other end, would not be a pleasant task for any body of troops. For the Commandant's little soldiers it savored of the impossible. And further, there was Ujong Pasir. It was a town of some size; five or six hundred people. With all his forces in a carefully prepared position, the Herr Commandant might hold it even though Taku Umar got modern guns. But to strip it of troops would be simply turning it over for looting and massacre. To divide his troops and leave a part for the protection of the town was to weaken both halves to an extent that would earn Taku Umar's earnest gratitude.

The commandant had the choice of regrettably allowing two hundred people to be killed on board the *Rose of Achin*, or of allowing the massacre of five or six hundred in Ujong Pasir, with the added feature in the latter case of failing to save the *Rose of Achin's* refugees and of having his entire body of troops as well as himself wiped out in the noble gesture.

The Herr Commandant sat tight in Ujong Pasir. It was not an imposing or an inspiring thing to do, but it was an eminently intelligent thing to do.

"I still think," said Waring wearily, "that if we only knew how we could fix the engines."

"Where's Denny?" asked young Bromberg. He hated himself for realizing it, but when emergencies arose he thought of Captain Denny.

"In the galley," said Ethelda. She moistened her lips. "He said that he is at his best when in trouble or—drunk. He has a couple of bottles and he doesn't seem worried at all. He laughed at me when I tried to get him to think of something."

"There's nothing to do but wait." The Reverend Peter Waring was very grim. "Rifles and ammunition are passed out. We can't build any better barricades. We'll have light to shoot by, anyway. I used to be a fairly good shot with a shotgun when I was a young man. I'll do my best with a rifle, today."

He turned away abruptly and walked toward the bow. Ethelda looked after him, hesitated, and hurried to his side. The youngest Bromberg, watching dully, saw her put her arm about his shoulders.

He shrugged tiredly. He heard a squeaky voice in a passionate fervor behind him, talking imploringly in Malay. Christopher, again in his flapping white garments, had chosen certain of the unregenerate on board and was making a last minute effort to save a few extra souls before Taku Umar attacked. He seemed to be shedding Malay tracts and perspiration at every pore.

The youngest Bromberg tried to smile. He could not manage it. He moved slowly away. He caught a glimpse of Captain Denny frowning as he sat with a bottle before him in the ship's galley. And somehow, with certain death staring him in the face Captain Denny did not look altogether debonair. When the fighting began he would be all right. He would not be afraid. But waiting to be killed was another matter.

Shrugging, young Bromberg went below. The second mate would need something mercifully deadly at hand when the attack succeeded. It wouldn't do to let him be taken alive again. Bromberg turned into the cabin and found the mate shaking with nervousness and dread.

THE tide flowed more and more slowly past the battered sides of the stranded ship. Chips flung overboard moved ever more slowly toward the shore. Presently they would stop at full flood. And then after an agonizing wait they would begin to move slowly out again. . . . .

And then the rafts would cast off and begin to float in an ungainly, unwieldy fleet toward the steamer. Tied together as they were, they would foul her and wrap themselves about her. The attack would begin. And this attack would succeed.

The youngest Bromberg came on deck and commandeered four men to carry the mate into the engine room. He looked hopeless, but it had to be tried. They vanished down the hatch, the mate gray with agony from the inevitable movements of his body.

Time passed. The chips ceased to move past the steamer. Flood tide had ceased to flow. A period of slack water. . . .

Bromberg came swiftly out on deck. He found the Reverend Peter Waring talking quietly with some of his flock, and interrupted without ceremony. Bromberg's face was flushed and feverish.

"The mate says we can repair the engines if we can gain time," he said harshly. "We're to put an anchor in a boat and drop it overboard astern. We can haul on a windlass and maybe get the ship out of the mud. The tide's at its highest. And maybe we'll float with the tide a while before we ground again."

Waring stared, then began to snap orders in Malay. A boat went over in record time. Men began to drop into it in spite of a sudden recrudescence of firing from the anchored raft that had fired during the night. The missionary shed his coat and was grasping the falls to slide down when Christopher pulled him aside.

"Rev'end Waring," he said desperately, "you are needed here, sar. I are not. Stay. And talk to those men who would not hear Word of God from me. Maybe they will listen when you preach to them."

He slipped down, seized the tiller, and squeaked his orders. Bullets began to hit the water all about the boat, until it had rounded the steamer's side.

It was the missionary who shouted to the men on watch above and set rifles to work flinging lead at the loopholes on the raft. Most of that lead was wasted, but it did slacken the fire a little.

There was a rattling of chain and a scream of warning from below. Then a more gradual, link by link letting out of the anchor chain. And then the grunting of men at the oars, pulling frantically. The weight of the chain dragged the boat back, and when it was slacked it touched bottom and held.

Twenty minutes of back-breaking effort proved that they could haul it hardly more than a ship's length from the bow of the steamer. One man was hit by the fire from the raft in the struggle with the anchor. They let it go overboard.

Before the ship's boat was alongside again the windlass was turning, the Reverend Peter Waring throwing his weight into it with the rest. And the cable grew taut, then more taut, quivering like a monstrous violin string. And it was full flood tide, higher, in fact, than the tide had been when the *Rose of Achin* grounded. The men at the windlass staggered and sweated and strained desperately. And inch by inch, and inch by inch, it seemed that the old ship moved.

Then, without a jar, she slid clear.

There was a breathless silence. There was no man on board who did not feel that a respite had been earned. The same tide that brought the rafts out from shore would carry the *Rose of Achin* floating sluggishly down the winding channel between the mudbanks. But no man could convince himself that more than a respite had been gained. It was unthinkable, it was impossible that the ship should float cleanly in the channel through all its meanderings, twisting and turning as it would be doing, without grounding somewhere on the way.

The Reverend Peter Waring gazed over the side at a little chip that had been thrown over some time before. The *Rose of Achin* was again stationary, hanging sluggishly by her anchor, her bow pointed toward the ashes that had been the village of Solanda. The little chip moved delicately, daintily toward the steamer. The tide had turned.

A yell came from the distant shore, a yell of triumphant anticipation. One could not see it, but those on the steamer knew that it meant the casting off of the rafts which spread out widely enough to sweep the whole harbor; which would be borne on the tide to the helpless, unnavigable steamer—which would thereupon be assailed with a merciless ferocity.

"We'll haul up the anchor," said the Reverend Peter Waring tiredly, "and go out with the tide—until we ground again."

Men manned the capstan. Christopher was whispering to himself, his eyes closed. He made little imploring gestures to something or someone entirely unseen. Tears trickled down between his closed eyelids. The rattle of the anchor chain began.

And suddenly Christopher had his eyes wide open, staring, and his voice broke in a shrill squeak and he panted.

"Rev'end Waring! Sar! I remember! In my village in China there was river, and lazy men went from one side to other by dragging stone on stream bed. Sar!"

Waring stared.

"We tie other anchor fast," panted Christopher. "We let out anchor chain only, sar. It drags. It holds us back a little. And we steer! Praise God, sar, I remember! I remember!"

It took precious minutes to explain—and Christopher did not know the explanation, anyhow. But they lashed the second anchor fast, and they let out a hundred fathoms of chain which was then in the shape of a huge loop. And then the first anchor was hauled up out of the mud and the *Rose of Achin* began to drift stern first down the channel. Stern first, of course, because the anchorless chain dragging in the mud kept her bow to the ebb current. And Christopher, almost incoherent with excitement and thanksgiving, squeaked explosively down the engine room hatch that the ship floated and could be steered.

When the second mate understood he had himself carried to the wheelhouse. He fainted on the way from pain, but there gave wild orders for the turning of the wheel of the steamer whose fires were out, whose boilers were empty, and on which there was no one qualified to pass even the Engineer Apprentice examination of the Board of Trade. Which last was, of course, most dreadful of all.

But the peculiar thing was that the backward-drifting *Rose of Achin* answered her helm. Not with any liveliness, and not with any promptitude, but she answered it. The dragging chain held her back just a little, so that the drifting rafts drew steadily nearer. But the fact that the current was moving faster than the ship meant that water was flowing past her, which meant that water would impinge on a rudder set hard to port or starboard, which meant in its turn that as the ship went down the channel with the sun behind her course, the deeper water could invariably be picked out from aloft and her rudder could be swung over in time to work her clumsy stern into the middle of the channel.

It was no masterly navigation. A self-respecting seaman would probably have wept with shame at the idea of drifting a steamer stern first out of a shallow harbor with a tide as motive power and a ground drag as the means of keeping a curiously inside-out steerage way. But it worked.

There was of course a certain comic aspect to the matter. A drifting match between a disabled steamer and a fleet of clumsy rafts is not an exciting sight, even when from time to time yells of triumph rise from the rafts through mistaken belief that this time the steamer has piled up on a mud bank. And it is not exactly a fast sort of sport. The tide was flowing no more than two and a half knots at its fastest. The *Rose of Achin* was drifting a shade less than two.

But she did not ground. With a vast, ungainly deliberation the old ship slid stern first past the tall and menacing jungle, past the shallow mud flats on which longlegged birds waded solemnly, toward the twin arms of jungle covered land which so nearly closed the mouth of Teluk Solanda.

TAKU UMAR seemed to waken very suddenly to the amazing possibility of her escape. Screams and howls of rage split the air. And the village boats darted away from the drifting rafts and came raging after her.

Then in the warm morning sunlight

there was the crackling of firearms, the spiteful spitting of strictly modern weapons mingling with the heavier booms of black powder ones, and the pungent reek of burnt smokeless powder drifted about in the calm which hung over the harbor.

The birds that hovered about the marshy edge of the water flapped into mid-sky with discordant squawkings. The monkeys in the jungle trees were scared into a frightened silence. And the *Rose of Achin* went wallowing heavily down the winding channel with a fleet of dugouts darting about her, trying to make fast to her sides, firing savagely at the figures on her decks, taking every conceivable chance to get men over her rail.

In all, five men reached the bulwarks, of whom two were able to charge the deck barricades. And one sank a *kris* in a convert's shoulder before three bullets found him.

Between the capes the *Rose of Achin* began to wallow in the ocean swell but went steadily if slowly on out, with the dugouts still swarming about her. Her defenders were no longer fighting with the desperation of men on the losing side, but with a joyous savagery, the teachings of the Reverend Peter Waring temporarily discarded. Captain Denny blithely took charge of a squad of admiring heathen and directed their fire in volleys. They began to get results. With ten men all firing at one boat, they sank it. Other men, envious, joined the squad, so that at the end Captain Denny was directing the fire of twenty odd little men, and it withered up and obliterated anything it was turned on. They sank five dugouts and crippled two more before the attackers drew off, literally foaming at the mouth with rage. The rafts, of course, could not follow the *Rose of Achin* out to the open sea.

She dropped anchor in sixteen fathoms, sand bottom, a full mile offshore. And thereafter her engine room became the scene of a vast activity under the chattered, stammered directions of the second mate, whose orders the youngest Bromberg translated and saw carried out.

AT FIVE o'clock in the afternoon the *Rose of Achin* steamed crazily up to the beach in front of Ujong Pasir and dropped anchor. There was the crackling of firearms on shore as the Herr Commandant beat off a raging and entirely hopeless attack Taku Umar had launched in sheer desperation. The *Rose of Achin* lay wallowing at her cable with salt water in her boilers, her engine room full of leaking steam, and an entirely impromptu engine room staff dancing joyously at their triumph. Curiously enough, there was no hymn singing. Apparently the fighting had caused a certain amount of backsliding which the Reverend Peter Waring would have to correct later on.

And the story ends there, of course. There was just one other significant scene, wherein the youngest Bromberg, in the sacred *gadong* of Bromberg & Co., Ltd., faced an indolently amiable Captain Denny with Ethelda watching bewilderedly.

"I'll take that fifty thousand guilders, please," said Captain Denny blithely.

"For what?"

"For going with you to Solanda and helping to rescue Ethelda here," said Captain Denny cheerfully. "You offered me ten thousand first, and raised it to fifty later on."

Ethelda smiled uncertainly.

"You're—joking, of course," she said queerly.

"Not at all," said Captain Denny hardly. "Bromberg made that bargain and I'm holding him to it."

"You haven't any written agreement," said the youngest Bromberg with a shrewdness that was surprisingly unbecoming.

Captain Denny began to look like a man who is on the verge of homicidal wrath. But his eyes remained quite cool.

"If you're a gentleman—" he began.

"I'm not," said young Bromberg. Then something occurred to him. "I'll give you the ten thousand I first offered," he said quickly, "if you'll sign a receipt."

He wrote out a receipt, wherein Captain Denny accepted ten thousand guilders as payment for his services for three days in the vicinity of Ujong Pasir and Solanda. Captain Denny signed it, scowling, and the youngest Bromberg gave him the money. He swaggered out to get joyously and uproarously drunk and to remain in that condition until the next visit of a *Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij* mailboat.

Ethelda looked at the youngest Bromberg, rather pale.

"Isn't it—funny, Meyer?" she asked,

with a quavery smile. "I thought I—loved him."

The youngest Bromberg clenched his hands.

"Couldn't you love me?"

It meant defying Grandpapa Bromberg, and it was an act of valor much beyond Ethelda's comprehension. But she shook her head. And yet— Her eyes upon him for an instant would have made some men believe that the resolution was not unchangeable. Most men would have waited, and kept on trying.

"I'll tell father," she said uncertainly, "about the money you had to pay Captain Denny for helping save us. I guess we can pay you back, in time."

The youngest Bromberg shook his head.

"I'll get it back," he told her. If in spite of his misery a trace of self-satisfaction crept into his tone, it was hardly noticeable. "The *Rose of Achin* was abandoned by her crew and became a derelict, liable for salvage. And Christopher and Denny and I are officially the salvors, since all the others were received on board as refugees. But Christopher was already in my employ, and by accepting that money from me Denny became my employee too. So the salvage money will all come to me. I'll get my ten thousand guilders back a dozen times over."

Ethelda regarded him very strangely indeed, then. And somehow she no longer looked as if she might love him some day if he pressed his suit. Ethelda, in fact, looked suddenly very lonely.

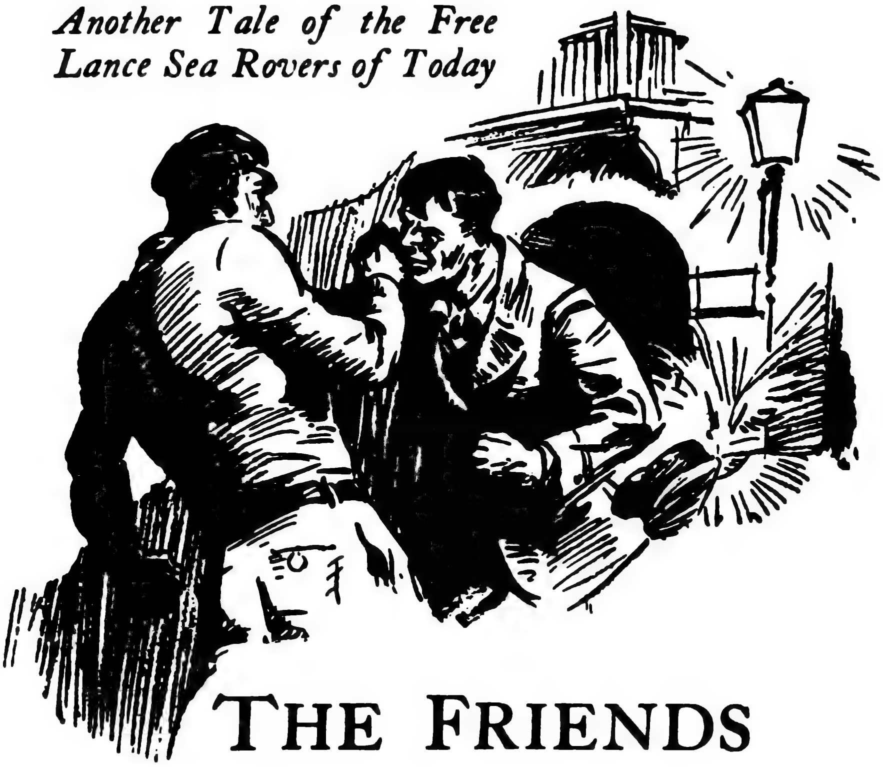
AND that is the last of the story. Captain Denny departed upon the mail steamer in a state of blithe intoxication. The last the youngest Bromberg ever heard of him he had spent all of his cash and was definitely on the beach again. And Taku Umar went back in the hills to plan further rebellion. And Christopher received a handsome bonus from the youngest Bromberg and bought himself a printing press. On that press he perspiringly prints tracts, in Malay, Dutch, English, and even in those Pasuma characters which are more commonly cut with a *kris* on slabs of bamboo. It is said that the tracts are of great effect in the edification and conversion of the heathen. And Ethelda, some two years later, became engaged to a young missionary who came out to help her father and who was considered a very earnest and conscientious young man.

The youngest Bromberg, however, won great praise. Even the Herr Commandant Van der Heyden officially commended him, and the New Netberlands Government patted him on the back and very cheerfully awarded him a thumping big salvage on the *Rose of Achin*. He was considered to have prevented arms from reaching Taku Umar and consequently to have averted a rebellion of some size.

This opinion, of course, was excellent for the business of Bromberg & Co., Ltd., and caused the youngest Bromberg's transfer to Padang, which is civilized and the center of government for all Sumatra. But before even that took place, Grandpapa Bromberg had him come back to Paris for a vacation and congratulations and a family council. It was universally conceded that the youngest Bromberg had distinguished himself and the family, and Grandpapa Bromberg beamed upon him, raised his pay and assured his future prospects, and arranged for his marriage to a second cousin, a wealthy and refined young lady of Frankfort, Germany.

In "A Thief of Tinian Time" by BASSET MORGAN, *coming next issue, you will find another excellent and diverting tale of the Eastern Islands.*

Another Tale of the Free Lance Sea Rovers of Today



THE FRIENDS

By HENRY LACOSSITT

BUCK KNIGHT, in mellow mood, swung along the streets of Havana's Chinatown at a rapid, though somewhat uncertain gait. He was feeling his Bacardi. He turned a corner and walked up a thoroughfare that would lead him to Eddie's place in Solon Street, where he tended bar during the day. It was very dark, the streetlights were dim and far apart, and Buck was not, due to the Bacardi, interested in the technique of his progress. Therefore, he collided violently with a man issuing from a dark doorway. The impact threw both off balance and they reeled for a moment.

"What the hell!" growled Buck, his mellowness vanishing, and a natural tide of belligerency rising furiously within him. "Heads up, ya big bum!"

The other was equally annoyed, and so expressed himself.

"To hell with you, sailor," said he in thick tones. "Wanta show me why I gotta keep heads up?"

Buck would. He swung.

He found his antogonist worthy, and, as the battle progressed, he felt an exultant thrill well up in his breast. For Buck was naturally a pugnacious soul, and this fight reminded him of Red Murdock, his best enemy. Hence, he threw himself into the struggle with the abandon of a dervish. Moreover, he was aware that his adversary was sympathetic to his mood.

Furiously they battled. Once Buck was moved to take advantage when the other fell backward, knocked over a step, and he wondered when he did not. He waited until the man rose before rushing again. And he found that the other did not take advantage of his misfortunes.

Slowly they edged to the streetlight, flailing silently, intently, oblivious to all save their glorious battle. Their faces were battered; they streamed perspiration: their bodies were bruised and their clothes torn, but their gasps sounded like guttural chuckles.

As they neared the light Buck flung himself furiously at his adversary. The other dodged, Buck's fist hit the empty air, and he tripped in a crevice between the huge cobbles. The impetus of his rush crashed him into his antagonist and they both went down, rolling over to come to a stop beneath the light. They sat up, bewildered. They looked at each other. They remained, after throaty inhalations, immobile.

For Buck Knight stared into the jumbled countenance of Red Murdock.

They remained thus, stunned with astonishment, for a minute, sitting in the silent street, with the light swaying gently in the soft trade wind on its wire above them. Then, as if actuated by the same impulse, they snarled, jumped to their feet, and started for each other. But again they acted identically. They halted abruptly. Their intended blows stopped in mid-air, and their clenched fists opened to clasp each other's hands.

"Red!"

"Buck!"

The expressions were simultaneous, and relieved, somewhat, the tension. They relaxed, released their hands, and smiled broadly, their massive faces battered pictures of pleasure. And then, with a rush of emotion that had lain repressed and increasing in each during the more than two years separation, came raucous and tremendous guffaws. They laughed until the tiny drops of moisture appeared incongruously in their steely eyes.

"Where," asked Buck when his almost hysterical laughter had subsided, "did you come from?"

"I been callin', boy. Got a sweet señorita. Where the hell did you come from?"

"Jail," answered Buck, but he laughed, and then told his story briefly.

"And now," said he, "suppose you have a drink on me."

"And then you one on me."

"O-kay."

SLIGHTLY more than two years before, Red, through an audacious coup at sea, had sent his enemy of long standing to jail. Red's ship, the *Old Purity*, had been loaded with liquor, and Buck's ship, the *Tropic*, filled with legitimate cargo. He had forced Buck to change ships with him. The Coast Guard had done the rest.

Buck, broke and without a ship after two years in the Federal Penitentiary in Atlanta, had found his way back to the tropics, and in Havana began life anew at Eddie's place. Also, he hired out as guide at night to tourists from the States, taking them to the hidden and forbidden that lay deep in the purlieus of the city. He was returning from one of these expeditions the night he met Red.

But Buck held no rancor for Red. For actually he, as well as Red, missed their old life, their old fights, their old brawls and their old enmity, which, in reality, was but a rough and hardboiled rivalry. Each was the other's chief interest in life, and Buck, when he saw Red, forgot, for the time, the prison term and previous grievances. And Red's attitude was reciprocal.

The enemies, through a peculiar twist in emotion, became friends.

RED'S new racket surprised Buck, but, as he was not well fixed financially, and, as he was predatory and slightly bored, he was ready for anything. Sedentary life did not suit him, and he longed to sail again. So he listened raptly to Red's new proposition next afternoon when they both had dispelled their hangovers with baths, tomatoes, clam juice cocktails, and dry sherry. They were seated on a bench at La Punta, enjoying the breeze that stole in from the sea, and watching the harbor traffic pass beneath the beetling bulwarks of Morro Castle.

Red had been prospecting. He had met an Englishman in Jamaica but a few weeks before. This man was agent for an international organization that indulged in various enterprises, not the least of which was gun running. It was interested now in the Syrian trade, where its activities had been almost crushed by the French. And what this Englishman wanted were new and unfamiliar ships and faces that would be strange to the French authorities. Red was such a man, and he had accepted. He was in Havana, when he met Buck, after cargo—Cuban tobacco—that the Englishman had provided.

Buck was willing, and Red took him on. It was a strange situation. Buck returned to his old ship, the *Tropic*, now manned by Red's crew and captained by Red. But it was novel, and Buck, in his enthusiasm, quite forgot the anomaly of his position. Actually he had no authority save that which Red conferred upon him, but he did not think of that either—then. So they cleared for Alexandria where they were to receive instructions from an Arab, whom the Englishman had named.

It was easy going and after three gliding weeks of beautiful weather they slipped into the Egyptian port. Both Red and Buck had been there before. Indeed there were few ports they had not visited and they looked forward to their first night ashore.

Together, they strode through the gate and hailed a victoria standing near. They directed the driver to the Place Mohammed Aly, and settled back comfortably. They jolted along the infamous Rue D'Anastassi, bawling a song that caused the contemplating merchants to look quizzically up from the mouthpieces of their narghiles and wonder. They reached the great square with its milling cosmopolitanism, and alighted.

They were gorgeous. Their flaming heads supported brown Borsalinos purchased in Havana. Their huge bodies were caparisoned gaily in light brown worsteds, and their shirts and ties were dazzling. Moreover, their tremendous right hands easily swallowed the crooks of two elegant Malaccas. Feeling snooty in their elegance they ate at the St. James.

They finished their liqueurs and went in search of the Arab, whose name was Ismet-el-Sed, and who lived in the Rue des Sœurs, a dark and mysterious thoroughfare. They found the number after numerous inquiries and ludicrous gesticulation to shrugging Egyptian police, and were admitted. Suavely he seated them, and suavely he told them, after they had proved their identity, what they were to do.

The guns he said were in readiness. The Druses needed them. The Syrians, never in sympathy with the French mandate, were, when they were able, abetting the shipments. And, with canny acumen, the men who supplied the arms had evolved a shrewd system. The guns were sent far from the seat of war. Whereas, the fighting progressed in the zone of which Damascus was the center, the cargo was landed at or near the tiny port of Alexandretta, not far from the Turkish border, and taken by caravans of camels to the mountains.

The ships running the arms received them from small sailing vessels that put out from the Egyptian coast at night and met the larger ship at sea. The runners then proceeded up the Levantine coast, keeping close, and at Beirut they received their final instructions when they were met by Syrian agents in a launch. Buck and Red listened very seriously and gravely, and were told that in three days they would receive the guns.

WITH three days to kill in Alex, they set out to do it in fitting fashion. They emerged from Ismet's and made their way back to Mohammed Aly, bent on roaring. And they did. An American dentist, in Egypt, so he said, because of his health, spotted them and joined them. But he was no match. They loaded him in a hansom and sent him home in a decidedly unhealthy condition.

Returning to the St. James, they found two choice ladies, one a Græco-Roumanian, and the other a concert of European blood, and picked them up. The ladies were anxious to revel, so they led their Gargantuan boy friends to a cabaret known as the Pavillon Bleu.

The lights were low, the music was jazzy, and the talent enthusiastic. Likewise the mixture of beverages was quite active; hence Buck and Red were unusually spry. They danced with their ladies, much to the discomfort of the other occupants of the floor, and they insisted on singing. They frequently halted in the middle of the floor and in braying duet rendered the selection then being played by the orchestra. Or, if it were not being played, it mattered little. The manager was quite annoyed, but, being a man of discretion, he saw through the brown worsteds.

"In Fourteen Hundred and Nintey Two,
a dago from It-alley,
A' roamed the streets of sunny Spain,
a' sellin' hot tamale.
And to queen Isabel he went, in search. . . ."

It was in the midst of this quaint mariner's ballad that, in the middle of the floor, Buck and Red opened their eyes suddenly and found themselves deserted. That is, deserted by their ladies and the rest of the dancers. For directly in front of them were four large persons who glared at them. They surveyed the four, who obviously were English, and who were on an expedition similar to that of Red and Buck, and quite willing for anything to happen. So, anxious to have it happen quickly, the Americans closed their eyes and began singing again.

"Oh the English sing of a British king, who
lived long years ago,
And he ruled his band with. . . ."

"Close up Yank!" snapped the foremost of the four, pushing them apart. "Close yer bloody traps, er we'll smash 'em shut!"

Buck looked at Red; Red looked at Buck.

"Stick around, Limey," said Buck, "and hear more about the lousy king."

That, as Buck had intended, was the beginning of the end—the end of a perfect evening for Red and himself. For the four before them rushed, snarling.

Buck and Red both caught a man, apiece, with one fist, as they were each set upon by two. Wheeling, they lashed out and smashed their other antagonists, and, taking the offensive, tore in with heads down. The six were soon a writhing, whirling mass of fists and bodies.

Pandemonium broke. A score of tongues shouted and screamed. Waiters ran to put a halt to the fracas and stopped at the edge of the circle that had formed around it. The manager fluttered about frantically, attempting to break through the circle and do something, he knew not what, and finally thought of the police.

Buck and Red went at their tasks seriously. The Englishmen were no match for them and they soon sensed it. Their crushing fists beating cruelly, they soon had the four groggy and retreating. One of them, catching Buck's mighty blow flush on the jaw, flew backward into the circle, which pushed him forward again, and he pitched on his face and lay still. Another turned and fled. The two remaining, seeing their companions gone, started to follow the one who had run, but were detained by four great hands. .One was crowned with the bass drum; the other found his head wedged in the tuba, just as the police arrived.

Buck threw a cornet, and Red hurled the snare drum at the approaching squad. Then they turned and ran. The first door they came to they burst into, and found themselves in the manager's office. They locked and bolted it, and hurried to the window. Raising it, they looked out. A roof was just beneath them, and they jumped to it. Hurrying over it, they reached the end of the block of houses, and, following the edge of a roof, came to a grated balcony. They lowered themselves to it, and to the one beneath it, and then jumped to the street. They were soon lost in the dark and labyrinthine thoroughfares, and made their way back to the waterfront and the ship. Gone were their Borsalinos and canes, but, they opined, it was worth it.

FOUR days later, the *Tropic*, loaded with guns, was bound for the Levantine coast. The cargo had been loaded according to schedule, and the ship headed for Beirut.

But there had occurred a change in Buck and Red. Their spree in Alexandria, intensive as it was, had served as an outlet for much of their enthusiasm. Their congeniality, artificial and exaggerated because of the stimulus of novelty, was waning, and they were rapidly becoming their natural selves.

Buck was moody. He watched the surging water, as he had done countless times before in this, his ship, and pondered. He thought of the days that had been, when, back in the comfortable American tropics he had mastered this very ship; had fought his way alone; had fought Red Murdock there on the bridge now, and had liked it. Also, he thought of the profits, which, perhaps, had as much to do with his mood as anything else. He remembered that they were fat; that they had come easy and gone easy; that he had been sole arbiter at their division. And he was far from that now.

True, Red had promised him a share, and a comfortable share, and Red had been fair enough to him—but that was not the point. Buck was individual, even as Red was individual, and Red also had shown signs of moodiness. Neither fully understood his mood, for neither was introspective, but they each sensed the change. Tension sprang up.

Buck's revery was interrupted at that moment by Red's voice.

"Sixteen hours to Beirut, Buck."

Buck turned. He saw Red looking at him.

"Yeah."

"Make it easy by tomorrow."

"Yeah."

"Hot racket, ain't it?"

"Yeah."

"Good money."

"Yeah."

"Aw, go to hell!"

Buck wheeled. Red was a little surprised at the savage glint in his friend's eyes.

"How much do I get outa this, Red Murdock?"

"I said thirty per cent after the crew gets their's."

"You get the rest, do you?"

"Sure! What the hell you think I'm runnin'—a relief ship?"

Buck said nothing, and Red turned and walked away. The tension grew. Each move that Red made was that of commander and each command irritated Buck. He looked over the familiar wheel in the pilot house at the sea; he nosed around the familiar engine room; he saw a thousand little familiar details, and always there was uppermost in his mind the fact that he was on his own ship by the grace of Red Murdock.

He stood watches; he checked cargo; he even did purser work—but these were the very things that angered him. He was an extra, he thought, a flunky.

They delivered the cargo at Alexandretta and started on the return voyage to Alexandria. They were to make another trip and then were to be given general cargo until another order came through; for the international organization took care of its transportation.

Buck and Red studiously avoided each other. Red had been paid. He counted out the money in equal shares among the crew. He paid them. Buck was on the bridge and Red sent for him to come to the ship's office. There, Red shoved his share across the desk to him.

"There, sailor," said Red. "This ain't half bad."

Buck counted the money. He looked hard at Red.

"The hell it ain't!" he exclaimed.

"Why ain't it?"

"By God, you know why! That ain't enough, Red Murdock. This is my packet!"

Red's hard eyes gleamed. He, too, had been smoldering.

"If you think that, stupid," said he, "try and take it!"

He ended the challenge as he half rose from his chair, and pounded his fist on the desk.

Buck rose too. Red waited a moment, then shoved his roll of bills in his dungarees. He started for the door. Buck rushed after him. He grabbed Red by the arm and whirled him around.

"By God—" he began.

"Don't be a damn fool, Buck," said Red warningly, and went out.

The incident passed, but the tension did not. Buck accepted his position silently, —outwardly at least. But he was waiting. It *was* his packet.

They reached Alexandria and went to Ismet for orders. They found him grave and anxious.

"The French!" he exclaimed, throwing up his hands. "The French are too shrewd. They know of the last shipment. They are watching. We must be wary."

Buck was silent.

"What," asked Red, dryly, "is the dope?"

"Well," answered Ismet, "when you reach Beirut, one of you must go ashore. Our man there is watched. He can neither put out to meet you nor send a radio. But you can do that, as you are not known. It is best that you be set ashore down the coast. Then you will go to Beirut the best way you can. There you will see our man, and then send the radio to the ship if all is well. If it is safe you must go by land to Alexandretta and join the ship there; if not, you must return here, and the ship must come back. You can settle among yourselves who is to be the messenger."

Buck and Red left with full instructions. The next afternoon they weighed anchor and shortly after dark met the gun fleet. They were on there way a little after sunup. Late that afternoon, Red approached Buck.

"Who'll go?" he asked laconically.

Buck shrugged. Red looked at him keenly.

"We'll flip," said Red. "Call it!"

"Heads," Buck sang out.

The coin flashed in the sunlight as it revolved, and fell to the steel deck. It rolled around in an arc for a moment, staggered, and fell flat.

Tails it was.

"I win," said Red, and paused as he looked long at Buck. Then, reaching out, he tapped Buck's chest with his forefinger. "You go," he said, "and be damn careful."

At noon next day they swung close to the coast just below Beirut. The ship stopped, and a lifeboat was let down. Buck with a few words to Red, went down with it, and was rowed ashore.

The friends separated.

BUCK landed but a scant three kilometers below Beirut. The *Tropic* was to haul out and stay anchored until he sent his message. He walked rapidly toward town. When he came to the outskirts he hailed a cab and was driven into the heart of the city.

He was sullen. He had not wanted to make this trip. Somehow, he had thought, if he stayed aboard, he might turn the tables on Red. Somehow, he thought, if that occurred, he might again master the *Tropic*, although he knew the crew was loyal to Red. This trip was galling. Again he was a flunky, a messenger boy. And Red was taking the lion's share.

He reached the Grand Hôtel D'Orient and registered. Then he went in search of the Syrian agent. He found the man and made himself known. The agent gave him the necessary information. Buck was satisfied that all was in order, and he sent his radio, in code, to the *Tropic*. He intended to spend the night in Beirut, and take a train next day for Aleppo. From there he would go overland to Alexandretta and meet Red.

He walked slowly up the hill from his hotel to the park that overlooks the crescent bay and looked out to sea. In the distance he saw a ship—the *Tropic* on her way. The sight infuriated him. On her way, thought he, to more profits for Red; to scant profit for him. On her way, his ship, as probably she always would be, with Red her master. On her way——

The thought that struck him then came like a violent shock, and he staggered slightly as he started. He leered and shook his fist at the speck on the horizon. Then he turned and walked rapidly down the hill to the hotel. He inquired the location of the French commandant's office and was told. He went there and, stating his business, was admitted. He was seated before the officer and, through an interpreter, Buck, in a very few minutes, told the story of the *Tropic* and the guns.

Buck whistled. He thought, after he left the place, that he should feel triumphant and elated, so he earnestly assumed that he was. This, thought he, with a surge of the old fury, would give Red a taste of the prison dose. This would end the intolerable situation. This would ruin Red, would turn the tables completely. No more would he be galled at the sight of Red on the *Tropic's* bridge. No more would he be patronized.

He went to his hotel, ordered a cocktail, and seated himself on the upper terrace, where he watched the day recede over the sea. Now he would return to the States. He would sign on some steamer and go back; back to the Caribbean; back to the isles of the Indies. He concluded that this wild chase over a quarter of the globe had been a silly move. Likewise, it had been a silly move to accept Red Murdock's charity. He wondered vaguely why he had and why Red had offered it. But that was over now. He would go back and soon he would have his own ship. He thought of the *Tropic*.

Somehow his elation failed to maintain. It waned with the shadows of the afternoon. It darkened with the slopes of the Lebanon. It cooled with the evening breeze that floated in from the Mediterranean. He strove stubbornly to revive it, but he failed. He squirmed uneasily and ordered another cocktail, but he left it untouched.

He thought of what would happen. Red, sauntering easily up the coast, would reach Alexandretta by midnight of the morrow; for that was prearranged. There he would lay off the coast, until signaled; and he would be signaled, for the agents there, were, of course, ignorant of Buck's move. He would come boldly into the harbor. Buck could see the picture, as French boats, filled with troops, put out and surrounded the ship. He saw them swarm aboard, arrest Red. He saw them arrest the crew, confiscate the cargo, confiscate the ship. Again he thought of the *Tropic*. The *Tropic*. . . .

Unconsciously he leaned forward and gripped the arms of his chair. Once more he thought of the days that had been, and he thought of Red. Perhaps—the thought crossed his mind, leaving a trail of acute nostalgia—he would never lay eyes on the *Tropic* or Red again, and suddenly Buck Knight felt very lonely and very melancholy. His stormy face was a portrait of puzzled sadness. But it changed. It merged into a scowl, and he jumped to his feet and rushed downstairs.

Dusk had fallen. He made his way to the radio office. But, to his consternation, he found it closed, and the two Senegalese soldiers guarding it eyed him suspiciously. His purpose changed to mad desperation, then, as he raced back to the hotel. He burst into the place and up to the astounded clerk.

"When," he bawled, "is the next train to Aleppo?"

"Nine o'clock, monsieur," answered the clerk. "You go to Rayak and change."

"What time do I reach Aleppo?"

"Tomorrow afternoon at four."

"God almighty! How far is it from Aleppo to Alexandretta?"

"One feefty kilos."

"Could I reach there by tomorrow night at midnight?"

"Eef you are lucky."

Buck looked at his watch. It was eight-thirty. Hurriedly, he paid his bill, grabbed a hansom, and careened down the hilly streets to the station, leaving his luggage at the hotel. It was the first he ever had carried, anyway.

He bought a second class ticket, and waited nervously. The train was made up, and he crowded into a second class compartment with seven Arabs. There was another maddening delay, and the train started. Slowly, it crawled out of Beirut and began its snaking climb through the Lebanon Mountains. Laboriously it jolted along, wheezing and snorting, until Buck, who disliked railroads anyway, wanted either to push it or wreck it.

BUCK did not know it, but the line he traveled was a dangerous one. With the Druse rebellion it became the key to Syria. Running to the junction at Rayak, it divided, one branch reaching out to touch Damascus, and the other splitting the country in a northward drive to Aleppo and beyond. Hence the French guarded it, for often the Druses, sweeping down from the mountains, raided it, and killed indiscriminately. But two weeks before Buck made his expiative journey, they had conducted an attack that was damaging. The British consul, journeying from Damascus to Beirut, had barely escaped with his life, and the tribesmen had retired leaving many passengers dead and two cars in flames.

The train on which Buck traveled was well fortified. On the engine were two machine guns, and on the rear platform were two more. And each car was guarded by four soldiers, who were stationed at either end, and armed with rifles and revolvers. At each stop, these men patrolled the steps, which ran the full length of the cars.

Buck, large and bulky, found himself extremely cramped in the compartment. Likewise the air was weighty, for the seven Arabs each had partaken heavily of garlic and other redolent spices at their evening meal. He squirmed to make himself comfortable, but only drew the irritated glances of his companions.

"What the hell you lookin' at?" he inquired belligerently, when one of them gave him a particularly long stare. But the man only shrugged, adjusted his *tarboosh,* mumbled something in Arabic, and returned to his interrupted nap. Buck grew angrier.

He ran up a shutter and poked out his head, only to have a bayonet thrust across his face and a sharp command in French greet him. The shutter was slammed down again, violently and quickly, and Buck was forced back into the stuffy compartment. He glared angrily at the seven Arabs, but they only slept placidly, so he tried it.

But he could not sleep. His mind, lulled to semisomnolence for the moment, would revert to his mission, and nervous thought-dreams attacked him. He would rouse with a start and curse, and he would wonder, fretfully, if he could make it. He passed the night thus, fitfully, and with a gnawing nervousness in the pit of his stomach.

Just before dawn the train stopped with a jerk. That was not unusual, for it had been doing so all night, but Buck roused. He looked at his watch. It was close to five. He stretched. His sleepiness had vanished, and he looked about him. The Arabs still slept in ludicrously cramped postures. He reached for the shutter and opened it cautiously, but he disturbed the Arab nearest the window. The man stirred sleepily, groaned, sat up, and looked out.

Buck pointed an inquiring finger in the direction of a town whose lights twinkled a few kilos up the track.

"Rayak," murmured the Arab, and closed his eyes.

Buck felt the need of air, so he opened the door and slipped silently to the step. He tiptoed to the end of the car and looked between the coaches. Two guards stood drowsing, leaning against the car, their hands and heads resting on their upright guns.

Buck noticed that the train was in a valley between two low ridges of hills, sprawling spurs of the Lebanon, running out to the plain to the east that divides that range from the Anti-Lebanon. He made out a low growth of brush on either side of the right-of-way, and a few stunted trees that grew on the sides of the low hills.

He lit a cigaret and stretched. Dawn broke slightly and the lights of Rayak became fewer. Still the train did not move. Evidently it was waiting for orders from the town. It stood motionless in the silent and chilly Syrian dawn, and Buck smoked and boiled inwardly, for his impatience was consuming and his night had not been comfortable.

He yawned irritably and stared vacantly at the plain that rolled away to the hills to the north. Suddenly he started and drew the cigaret from his lips with a jerk. He saw, rising slowly from the brush, a head—a head covered with *tarboosh* and white roll. It rose higher and he saw a torso clad in a black robe with a white girdle about the waist. Another head and body similarly clad rose beside it. Another and another and another. He looked between the coaches to the plain on the other side. It was happening there, too. The valley, like the furrows of earth in the Argosy, was sprouting men!

Buck looked anxiously at the guards. He didn't exactly know what was going on, but he didn't like it. The guards still drowsed. He looked back at the plain. It swarmed with men. All was silent as a tomb. Buck acted.

"Hey!" he yelled.

At this cry the guards started jerkily and a fusillade of shots peppered the train.

"*La Druse!*" the cry went up from scores of throats.

BEDLAM broke loose. From the front and rear of the train came the vicious whir of machine gun fire poured into the charging tribesmen. From the windows came the rattle of rifle fire, and from the plain came a deluge of lead that splintered the shutters and crashed the ventilation windows above.

Buck ducked. Not only did he duck; he dived from the step to the gully beside the embankment, and, as the tribesmen were aiming high, he was safe, temporarily. He was not afraid, but he was very angry. Not only was he being delayed in something he wanted very much to do; he was, perforce, a noncombatant in a good fight. He wondered how he could make the train to Aleppo now. This thing seemed likely to last all day. The train at Rayak surely would pull out, as soon as the battle broke. He wanted to make that train. His stubborn mind was set. Not that he liked Red more; he liked less the loss of the *Tropic* and his chief interest in life.

He wondered why the train did not move. He could not know that the engineer had been shot in the first volley, and he cursed that unfortunate vehemently. For groveling in the gravel was not, exactly, to his liking.

The Druse attack was split. Horsemen circled the train, firing, while those on foot edged forward, carrying on a desultory fire. Several times the foot soldiers had attempted a charge, but the awful crossfire raking them from the head and rear of the train drove them back. The machine gunners were doing well. But the shrieks and agonized screams from inside the cars told that the Druse fire was also effective. The fight was a deadlock.

It might not have been had the Senegalese cavalry, stationed in Rayak, been able to attack. But their force was small, and they could not venture from their base in the face of the Druse numbers. They had ridden to the edge of the town several times in an attempt to relieve the train, but had retreated on each occasion with the onslaught of the tribal horsemen, who could leave the men on foot to engage the train.

The train force evidently realized this, for a Senegalese gunner, remembering engines from the war in France, left his piece to his companions and grabbed the throttle. The train began to move slowly.

Buck was frantic. If he boarded the train he would be shot; if he did not, he would be left in a precarious position. Alone and cut off from Rayak, he could never hope to make the northbound train and also his life was endangered. He had to make that train somehow, and he cast about for some way to get on the moving one above him. He thought of making a run for the step and diving into his compartment. But he cast that aside as he thought of those within and that they would never open the door. The wheels above began to move faster and he became desperate.

But desperation drove an idea into his head. He saw the rods beneath the cars. Waiting until the trucks had passed, he raised himself and dived under the car and across the rods, clutching frantically to hold his balance. When he did he looked out. Again he was temporarily safe, for he was partially protected by the step and the fire of the tribesmen was still high.

The train gathered speed and rolled down a little grade toward the town. As it did, Buck could see the Druses preparing to attack. The men on foot drew back a little, and separated, allowing the horsemen to filter through. These troops galloped forward, firing as they came, with the men on foot following. Nearer they came and nearer, as the train went faster, and Buck realized that they were going to try to enter the windows.

He saw a forest of horses' legs. One animal, a little in advance of the others, was coming straight toward him. It came on with incredible speed. It mounted the embankment. Its hoofs spattered gravel and sand in his face. He heard a thud and a shriek as a bayonet skewered its rider, and a black robed body fell beneath the wheels.

The horses' legs thinned and Buck knew that the attack was withdrawing, as he saw squat dwellings begin to appear on either side. The train was entering Rayak and, looking northward, Buck saw the one for Aleppo, speeding in the distance. It stabbed him with disappointment and almost with despair, but he knew he must make it some way. And, because he was overwhelmingly stubborn, he knew he *would* make it some way.

THE attack had waned, it is true, but it returned with renewed vigor as the tribesmen galloped into the streets. But another turmoil reached Buck as the train stopped. The Senegalese cavalry, now secure in proximity to its base, which was fortified with electric barbed wire, sallied to battle.

It struck with awful force, fierce African blood rising savagely to battle. And it struck on the flank, for the tribesmen were occupied with the train. Emptying their revolvers, the black cavalrymen drew their sabers and charged the tribesmen. These, in turn, drew their ancestral scimitars and half-moon axes and the fight became a hand-to-hand mêlée.

Buck, watching, was thrilled. He saw the great blacks bear down on their more slightly built enemies, and, fascinated, watched thrust, stroke and parry. He forgot for the moment the train that was hurrying northward, leaving him behind. But he remembered soon enough, and, realizing that minutes were precious, racked his mind for some way to catch it.

Watching, he saw many horses, their riders stricken from their backs, gallop about in confusion, some to die from a bullet from the train. And, watching them, he saw a possible solution for his problem. He had ridden a horse once, back in the States on a farm, and he could do it again. It remained for him to reach one.

He saw, directly in front of him, a Senegalese and a tribesman engaged in fierce struggle. The negro, larger and more heavily mounted than his adversary, forced the Druse back. Closer they came and closer, the African fighting with saber, the Druse with ax, until the tribesman's horse stepped on the ties of the track. There the Druse stood, as it were, with his back to the wall. He parried a blow by the Senegalese that threw the black off balance, and, rising in his stirrups before his enemy had recovered his seat, struck with his ax. The blow, descending in a whizzing arc, split the negro's head and entered his chest. But the Druse's triumph was short-lived, for a French bayonet, thrust from a car window, impaled him.

He swayed a moment, shuddered as the steel was withdrawn, cried out convulsively as his vitals vomited blood into his burning throat, and slid from his horse, his foot catching in the stirrup. Buck, watching, saw his chance.

He leaped from the rods. Swiftly taking with his right hand the saber the dead Senegalese had dropped, he jerked the Druse's foot loose with his left hand, and, grabbing the bridle, threw himself across the saddle. The horse reared, but Buck clung and righted himself in the saddle.

Through the battle he urged his mount clumsily, clinging to the horn with one hand and lashing out mightily with his saber, clutched in the other, as he strove to cut his way out. Those on either side who saw him, flaming red head, civilian clothes, massive face set in a fierce scowl, were astonished and perhaps frightened, for the instant, into immobility, and that saved him. He gained the edge of the battle. There a Druse attacked him, but half-heartedly, for the tribesmen was not sure this was not some supernatural being, and Buck's saber knocked the scimitar from the man's hands. The Druse had never felt strength like that, and unarmed, he wheeled and fled.

Buck's horse, born for speed, fairly flew, frightened by the confusion and by this strange rider on its back. Buck, casting away the saber, let it go, and clung desperately, guiding it to follow the railroad track. For there, he knew, lay the only path to success. He figured the slow speed of the Syrian train would allow him to win the race, for, if it were like the one of the night before, stopping at every chance, never attaining any great speed except on grades, a fast horse could overhaul it.

He sped past Bedouins, who watched him curiously and fearfully, muttering the name of Allah; he flew through tiny towns of conical mud huts; he almost lost his seat, as he labored to make the horse follow the track, but he gripped and clutched to mane, to horn, to bridle; and on he went.

How long he rode, he never knew. But topping a rise in the plain, he looked down on a small town and there, waiting sleepily at the station, was his train. His horse was tiring, but he whacked it soundly on its rump, kicked it in the ribs, and it renewed its speed.

It tore down the hill and, at the base, stumbled. Buck flew over its head, turning several somersaults, and came to a sitting posture beneath a row of great granite pillars. He was at ancient Heliopolis, but he did not know it, and he looked dazedly at the ruins, wondering vaguely what they were until he was aroused by the screech of the train's whistle.

He jumped to his feet and ran haltingly, for he was very sore, to the nearest car. He gained the step, showed the ticket he had bought in Beirut, and slumped into a compartment.

The train wheezed, jerked, and moved northward, and Buck Knight fell into an exhausted sleep.

HE WAS awakened by a train guard, who shook him roughly. Rousing, he looked out and saw it was late afternoon. Also, he saw that the train had reached a large city.

"*Aleppe,*" said the guard peevishly, and Buck, realizing suddenly what it was all about, jerked to activity.

He bolted off the train and ran through the station. Gaining the street, he hurried along, looking for one of the rare garages he had been told by Ismet he would find there. He found one and entered. The Turk who owned it squatted comfortably on a carpet, smoking a narghile.

Buck spilled his tale in rapid conversation, and gestured with his hands. The Turk listened attentively and shrugged.

"No spik Inglis," he mumbled, and resumed smoking.

Buck drew back his arm, and the Turk cowed and scrambled out of the way. Hurriedly, then, he called to an attendant, who came up to Buck. The Turk addressed the man, who looked at Buck.

"I spik Inglis," said he.

"The hell you do!" answered Buck. "Well, I want a car."

"For what, monsieur?"

"I wanta get to Alexandretta."

"Ouf, ees not possible, monsieur! Ees late. Road, heem dangerous. Bandeets, shoot. Ees——"

But Buck had withdrawn from his pocket a sheaf of Egyptian pound notes. He counted them, eleven in all, and all he had, and shoved them at the man. The attendant and the Turk stared avidly. They talked a moment. Then the attendant turned to Buck.

"We take you, monsieur," he said with a shrug, "but ees dangerous."

"When'll we get there?" growled Buck.

"'Leven 'clock, maybe. Ten 'clock, maybe."

A few minutes later, Buck was on his way. The car in which he rode, an American make, was speedy. In the front seat were two Arabs, one of them, the driver, the man who spoke English. The other had come along as relief driver and general aid in case of trouble. And about the radiator cap was strung a string of beads—a charm against the evil eye.

The road they took *was* dangerous. It led from the sea and was the only practical artery direct from the Aleppo to Alexandretta. Over it came great caravans; those from the interior carrying wool and filigreed silver work to the sea; those from Alexandretta carrying oil and products of the Occident.

And because of these caravans, and the freight and money they carried, there infested the low hills of the plain and the heights of the Lebanon Range that skirted the sea, a group of banditti, renegades of many nations, who, eluding the road patrols of Syrian troops, pounced upon traffic, looted and slew, and kidnapped passengers who seemed likely ransom.

But Buck did not know this; nor would he have bothered if he had known it. There still stuck in his mind his stubborn purpose. Speeding along he scarcely thought of anything else, and it would go hard with anyone who crossed him.

The English-speaking attendant could drive. The car hurtled along at terrific speed, but the man took the curves easily, scarcely slowing, and, when night fell, they were far from Aleppo. They stopped once for water at a little town on the quasi-desert, but they did not delay. They passed the village of Jindaris about eight o'clock, and the driver, turning his head slightly, told Buck they were halfway. Soon they began to climb the rise that marked the beginning of the Lebanon, and Buck was elated. He bade fair to be in time.

But he enthused too soon. For, as they reached a stretch of road that ran along a tableland between two ridges, he heard a shot. It was followed by more, and he heard a bullet spank the side of the car. Looking out, he saw horsemen riding toward the car from both sides, shooting as they came. The driver turned, fear pinching his face.

"Bandeets!" he gasped in dismay.

"Step on 'er!" yelled Buck and the car leaped to greater speed.

But further up the road the headlights revealed a line of riders who spanned the way, their guns trained on the oncoming automobile. Buck yelled for the driver to rush them, but the man's nerve was not equal to that. He slowed and stopped. Buck, cursing wildly, started for the wheel himself, but stopped when he saw men ride up beside the car. He decided to let matters run their course, but he did not mean to be delayed long.

The bandits clustered about the car. They learned from the Arabs that the passenger was either British or American and concluded they could make some money out of him. So, their guns held on him, they ordered Buck to get out. He did, glaring at them fiercely, but he made no outburst, for he realized now that cunning was his greatest asset.

The two Arabs were made to alight also, and they did, the driver, in his fright, leaving the engine running wildly. Under guard, the three, after being searched for weapons, were lined up at one side of the road, while their captors gathered in the headlights to confer. They snarled and argued.

Buck and the Arabs were across the road from the car, in the dim reflection of the headlights. One man stood guard over them with a rifle. Buck, standing between the Arabs, saw a chance. He edged over to the one who spoke English.

"This road," he whispered. "Does it go all the way to Alexandretta?"

The man nodded.

"How can you tell it?"

"Ees white, of rock, all way."

"How far to the town?"

"Seexty—seventy kilos."

Buck nodded. He looked at the group in the light who were still arguing wildly. They were undecided about ransom and about Buck. He looked at the guard, who was interested in their conversation. He looked at the car, its engine still running noisily.

Suddenly he doubled and clutched his stomach. He thrust his hand frantically under his belt and into his trousers. He writhed and turned around. He seemed possessed by a fit. He gasped and cursed softly, as if in pain. The guard, interested and curious, came close. He leaned over to investigate such strange conduct. As he did, Buck's brawny fist crashed into his temple. He fell heavily, but the engine drowned the sound, and the conferring group, blinded by the headlights, saw nothing.

Buck grabbed the guard's rifle. He stole swiftly to the car, his eyes on the group before it. Lightly he entered and took his seat at the wheel. One hand holding the rifle, he throttled the engine down easily, in almost imperceptible gradation. It was a high-powered car, so he shifted to second, feeling the clutch carefully. It made no noise. He released the emergency brake and grabbed the wheel. Lightly he let in the clutch. The men still talked. Buck staked his escape on one move—if the engine flooded he was finished.

He jammed down the accelerator, and, as he did, fired through the windshield at the group. The car jumped forward. He released the wheel and pumped several shots at the bandits who now, confused by the sudden charge of the car, were struggling to get out of the way. Some fell before the fire; some were knocked down, as the car leaped past them.

Firing a parting shot, Buck dropped the rifle, shifted to high, and was gone. His enemies, too bewildered for good aim, fired wildly without effect, and ran for their horses. But Buck was not to be caught.

BUCK followed the white road with the accelerator jammed to the floor. It was nearly ten o'clock by now. He did not know how much further he had to go, but he was taking no more chances. He sped through villages, once disregarding a road sentry's challenge to halt and having several shots fired after him. But he did not stop. He hurtled on, up the winding road to the crest of the Lebanon, and then began a mad descent, careening dangerously on two wheels, as the road twisted in its grade.

Finally he saw, far below him, the lights of a town and his heart jumped. That was Alexandretta. He flew down, down, down, until he reached a long hill, when he shut off his engine and coasted. Faster, then, than if he had been under compression, he sped toward the town. He reached the outskirts a little after eleven and slowed down.

When he reached the harbor he abandoned the car and ran along the waterfront. Finally he found what he wanted—a launch. The doors that opened to its engine were secured with a padlock, but he smashed it with a block of heavy wood lying near by, and, working rapidly, cranked the motor. It sputtered and roared, but stopped. He tried it again, with the same result. Finally it started and remained going. He was about to swing out when he heard a yell behind him.

A Syrian, waving his arms wildly, bore down on him. But Buck knocked him into the water, and was on his way.

Out he went to sea, breasting a swell, leaping from wave to wave. He turned south and there, on the horizon, he saw lights—the lights of the *Tropic*. He looked at his watch. Eleven thirty. A half hour before the signal, and Buck Knight cursed in triumph.

Slow ahead came the *Tropic*, lolling easily in the swell, as Buck approached her. The staccato motor of the launch attracted men to the rail and, as he swung alongside, he hailed them. When they answered, he asked for Red. That gentleman appeared in a semiclothed state, as Buck had interrupted him as he was taking a nap. He threw his flashlight on the occupant of the launch below him and gave a gasp of throaty amazement. Buck forestalled any preliminary questioning.

"Don't go in," he yelled. "They're wise."

"Who's wise?"

"The cops, ya goddam fool!"

"How d'ya know?"

"Hell, I oughta know!"

"All right— Gawd, Buck, where the hell you been?"

"Through hell. What's it to ya?"

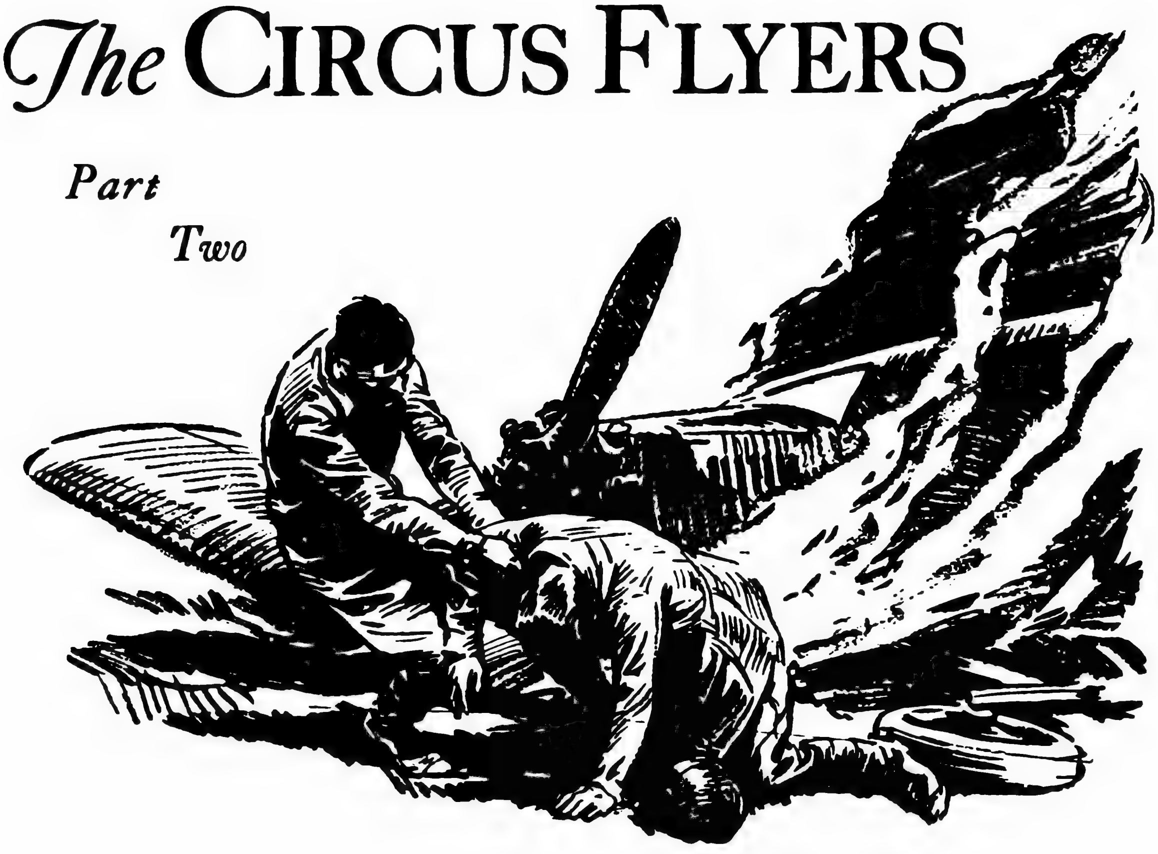
"All right, all *right!* Don't get hard. Come on up."

"Go to hell, Red Murdock! I been through hell, all right, and to keep you and that packet from gettin' glommed. But only, by God, 'cause I wanted to get you myself and I'll get that packet back too. I'm through with you, but I'll see you later—and how!"

Buck scarcely knew what he said, but he was happy. And he putted off in the darkness, leaving an astounded Red and an astounded crew to watch him disappear in sea and sky.

The CIRCUS FLYERS

Part Two



Preceding Events Briefly Retold

The Gavin-Garfield Circus was facing ruin. Some mysterious force, operating in the dark, and for unknown reasons, was doing its best to cripple the great show. An unprecedented number of accidents were happening. Animals died, equipment went bad, performers were injured. And the show was getting a bad reputation in the towns along its route. In some, even, it was not permitted to set up its big top. All of which presaged financial disaster. And to solve this mystery, and incidentally to earn money to develop a promising oil field which they owned, came George Groody and Tom Service.

They were no amateurs, either at sleuthing or the show business. Groody was an ex-Army air ace. And since the war he had done stunt flying for several circuses. Service was a crackerjack sleuth. He had made an enviable reputation for himself in the U. S. Secret Service. As a team, these two had cleaned up a criminal ring operating on another well-known circus.

Musselman was the general manager of the Gavin-Garfield show, a shrewd business man sent to the lot to protect the interests of the majority owners. To him Groody presented his proposition. He and Service would get to the bottom of this mysterious conspiracy which was destroying the great show. They were both of proven reputations in that game. And, further, Groody would get two airplanes and do stunts to increase the waning interest in the show. The price was high: $2,000 a day. High—yet Musselman thought it was worth it.

They concluded their bargain, the price to be kept a secret from the other bosses of the show. Then Musselman introduced the pair around. Groody saw a lot that was wrong immediately. The other bosses, old time show people, hated Musselman. He was an outsider, and they resented his dominance; particularly, Jack Farrell, manager and twenty-five per cent owner of the show. And Groody found that he and Tom Service were likely to be hated as Musselman men.

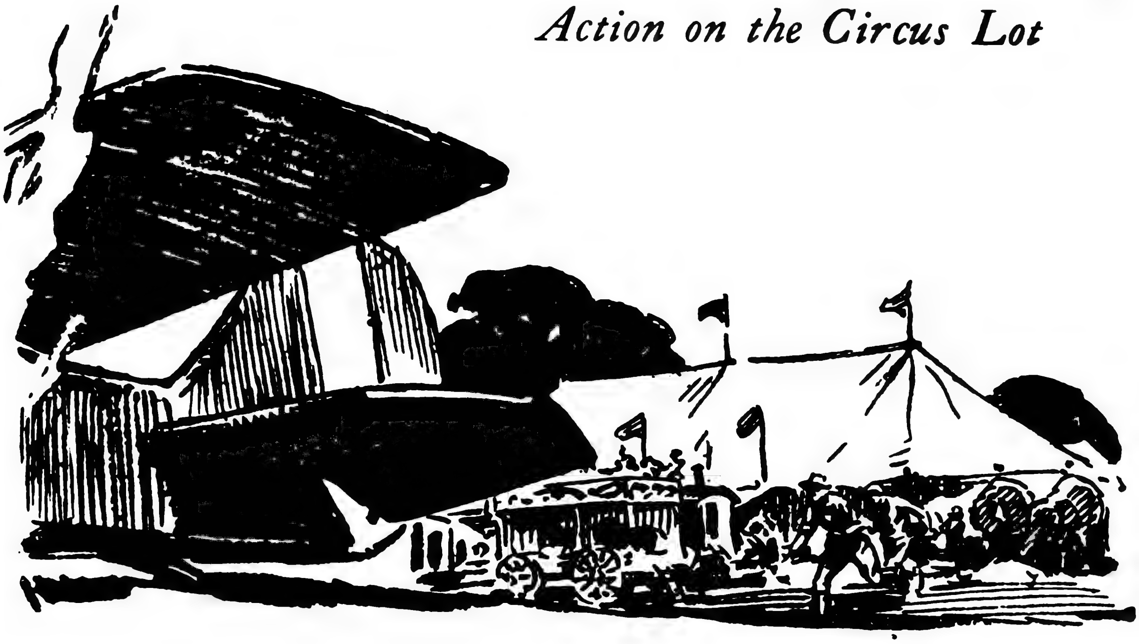
Groody witnessed some trouble that very first day. Musselman got into a scrap with Bronk O'Donnelly, the belligerent boss canvasman. O'Donnelly almost quit. And that would have seriously crippled the circus. But Jack Farrell intervened and the quarrel was patched up.

Next, an accident happened while the trapeze artists were doing their dangerous stunts. One of the swinging bars became loose and the star jumper went plunging towards the sawdust, outside the safety zone of the net. Groody jumped to the rescue and saved a life at the risk of his own. This heroism made him friends among the hostile troupers.

Another accident occurred that evening. The knife thrower almost killed his wife, who acted as the target for his knives. The knives were examined, and in half of them the blades had been loosened. This made the knife thrower's

By THOMSON BURTIS

A Serial of Mystery and Thrilling Action on the Circus Lot



aim uncertain. Someone had plotted deliberate murder. A negro boy was hanging around the tent. One of Musselman's detectives whisked him outside to question him about his suspicious actions. A shot rang out. The negro was dead. The detective said he had shot in self-defense when the boy pulled a razor on him in the dark.

Panic ran through the circus like wildfire, after this latest calamity. Groody, sensing the mood of the performers, realized that something must be accomplished soon, or the troupe would get entirely out of hand.

CHAPTER IX

GROODY SHOVES OFF

IT WAS nine o'clock, and Groody and Service stayed at the sideshow. The troupe of negroes were excited, but not unduly cast down. In fact, the men did considerable flashing of white teeth, and Groody heard one of them, outside the tent wall, say to another:

"I knowed that black boy'd get his'n! Yes, suh! Done tried t' git away with showmen lak he run nigguhs in Memphis! Hee, hee, hee! I wisht it had been Mistuh Farrell he tried tuh carve up! Hee, hee! He wouldn't o' been shot—he'd jes' been ground up lak jelly!"

"Dat's hell 'bout de knives, Sam. Dis yere show gettin' too warm for me. When we gits to warm country I's gone. I can trumpet in some nice, safe dance hall, I kin, with plenty o' gin and a baid to sleep in. I ain't fixin' to have nothin' happenin' to me!"

Groody repeated the conversation to Service and MacDonald, and the old man nodded.

"I'm fixin' to get me a new troupe," he told them. "This bunch won't last. That's the hell of this business—keeping a good attraction when you get one."

"How'd you happen to get into it?"

"Oh, I was a sort of peddler and then a medicine show spieler forty-five years ago. Then I went broke, and went out to a fair, all dressed up, and saw a farmer exhibiting an eight legged calf free. I bought the calf, showed him in a piano box for ten cents a throw, made eight hundred dollars that week, and done well for a year all over.

"I been in it ever since, except when I run a shoe store for a few days."

The genial old reprobate chuckled elfishly, which prompted Groody to ask:

"How'd that happen?"

"I had me a sea serpent made, and I was hiring stores in small towns to show it in. Beautiful thing, and I claimed it was a sea serpent that the papers had been full of a few months before. Did well.

"Well, in Dohart, Connecticut—I'd come from Connecticut—I showed it just a few doors away from a shoe store that wasn't doing so well. The owner was a smart aleck, and he told me I wasn't handling it right. I oughta put it in a lake about forty miles away, have a press agent, work it up, and make money. I started to figure, and I knew he was losing money on his store. Just a little place. Well, I egged him on until we made a trade—him taking the sea serpent and me the store.

"I didn't have long to work. I had an auction, sold every pair of shoes, made me a thousand dollars free and clear, and skipped town in five days—just in time."

"Why just in time?"

"That sea serpent was made out of heavy cardboard, and when it got in the lake it just disappeared on this feller."

Groody grinned as that quizzical, sparkling eye twinkled up at him.

"Freaks is a funny thing," resumed the old man, having fortified himself with another drink. "I've made blue men with a tub of vinegar and dye, and I had the double faced boy—a Mexican with a big wen on his head—and I made the first wild man out of a nigger with six toes and six fingers. I've throwed knives, and had a mermaid in a tank on the ballyhoo platform that I almost thought was real myself. But there was one that died on me that was a peach. I wish I could get some other feller to do it, but they're scared to try even after I show 'em how it's done.

"But I had one that was a peach. Every sideshow in the country was after him. He strolls in one day in Farifold, Iowa, and wants to join. His act is holding big rocks on his head, and letting any man break the rock—or hit it, anyway—with a sledgehammer for fifty cents.

"And he did it! The rubes fell like ninepins for it, like they do throwing balls at a darky's head.

"Well, sir, I studied and studied about that act. I knew it was something phony, but I couldn't figure it out. Then I got an idea, and I started on myself with small rocks and a hammer. And I saw what it was. The rock took up all the force of the blow, seemed like, and the shock didn't get on down to the feller's head at all! Anybody could do it."

"I'd hate to try," Service stated.

"What became of him?" Groody inquired.

"I had to let him go. It was too hard to get big rocks," MacDonald said sadly. "But he was a big money maker, bigger'n the men only show, with the cooch dancer. That's long gone, too. Times are changing. Got to be good, now."

"Didn't you ever get arrested for that men only stuff?" Groody asked him, egging him on.

The lean flyer's mouth was twisted into a quizzical grin as he reveled in the twinkling eyed showman's reminiscences. And he and Tom were getting more and more of the outlook of a showman, from the inside. It might be helpful later.

"Only once. Show wouldn't even raise a ripple, in these days when there's more wild women on musical comedy stages than there are in Africa. But I gave a hot spiel and the dancer did a mean cooch in breast plates and somethin' around her waist. And it was sensational in the small towns, in those days.

"It was in Jackson, Michigan, that I got tipped off after an extra hot spiel that the sheriff was in the crowd o' men that come in at fifty cents a throw. So I told the dancer to keep on her clothes she wore in the outside show. And to put the soft pedal on the wiggle.

"She done it, and by God if I wasn't arrested for takin' money under false pretences!"

Groody snorted hilariously, and Tom Service joined in the outraged exhibitor's unrepentant chortles.

"Here comes Musselman," Groody said suddenly, looking at his watch. "And it's about time for me to hustle. I envy you staying around here, Tom, but I'll be back pronto, believe me."

The general manager essayed a smile as he inquired the hour of Groody's departure, but his frowning brow and abstracted eyes were those of a man deep in unpleasant thought.

"Everthing all right about the bail," he told them. "Damn it, why couldn't that shot have just winged this coon? Well, no use of crying over spilt milk. I'll take you down to the train in the truck, Groody. Let's go."

"I'll wire Corrigan, and fly in from Indianapolis," Groody told Tom. "I'll be at the Severn there. Back as quick as I can, and I'll send your baggage on to you. Mail me a route card. So long, everybody."

They were a half hour too early at the station, and Musselman, as twilight fell, was silent and distraught. Finally he said slowly:

"As I said, I want you and Service to do anything necessary to clean up this mess. It's uncanny, horrible, the way things keep on happening—and never a clue! Pretend to hate me, if you like, when you return; anything that's necessary. Then," and he smiled a mirthless, crooked smile, "you'll be right in with the rest of the boys."

Groody wasn't a susceptible man, but there was a hint of pathetic, weary loneliness and discouragement in the showman's words which was profoundly impressive. Groody's experience with the Levin-Willet carnival had taught him the fact that the outdoor show business, from performers and executives to the lowest canvasman, was a sort of closed corporation, a guild, in which the members took a fierce pride. And Musselman, entirely alone, was fighting his own men as well as the vague menace which hung over the show.

"You've got the toughest job I ever heard of," Groody told him bluntly.

Musselman nodded. Then, surprisingly, he started to talk, elbows on his knees and gazing absently across the yards. He told of being born in a circus, of his performer-parents leaving the big top for vaudeville when he was six years old, of his debut as an actor at the age of twelve, and then his departure from the stage to enter the business world, wherein he had climbed speedily. His father-in-law owned the show, as well as being interested in various theatres and other departments of the show business, and he, Musselman, was general manager for all his enterprises.

Told simply, it was nevertheless a moving story of determined ambition and iron perseverance, and the man's dark, strong, strained face gave a hint of the power within which had raised a circus baby to a powerful executive. And the words he spoke in the dingy little station were admission of another fact: that Musselman, so entirely alone in his job, was eager and anxious for a confidant.

Groody smoked slowly, and listened, and said nothing, which was the best thing he could have done. When the headlight of his train was shining down the track they both arose, and Groody held out his hand.

"Here's hoping everything comes out right," he said seriously, his narrow eyes meeting Musselman's prominent dark ones steadily.

"Amen," nodded the showman, suddenly his vigorous, frowning self again. Then he smiled. "I certainly have done a lot of talking," he said shamefacedly. "But perhaps it will make you understand better. I'm depending on you a great deal, Groody. From now on we're enemies, apparently, if that seems necessary—but I hope what those bigoted old-timers tell you when you get back won't get you off the track, too, and that we'll continue to work together. Good luck—and hurry!"

Which Groody had to do to get his train, and again in Chicago to collect his baggage and get another. When he stepped off the Pullman next morning he purchased a paper. In the taxicab he surveyed it idly. Then his lean body stiffened, and his narrow eyes froze to the short item on the bottom of the front page.

Bronk O'Donnelly and Musselman, walking to the show train at one o'clock the night before, had been beaten up by assailants unknown. O'Donnelly had evidently been left for dead, for he had been shot once in addition to the beating. Musselman, while badly beaten, had not been shot. The thugs had been frightened away before finishing their task.

Groody's eyes stared unseeingly out the window of the jolting cab.

"Now just who in hell has such a grudge against that show that they're willing to commit murder—and why? Or was it just some canvasmen with a crow to pick with Musselman and O'Donnelly?

"Tom'll find out, I suppose. But gosh, I wish I was there!"

CHAPTER X

EXPLANATIONS

SIX DAYS later two airplanes appeared in the sky over Jacobson, Ohio, at eight-thirty in the morning. Groody, peering down like some grim gnome of the sky, spotted the long line of white show cars standing in the yards. Then his roving eye picked up a huge expanse of white, surrounded by other smaller patches, out at the edge of town.

Big Corrigan, who had arrived from Texas the day before, was following Groody, and from a hundred feet away he nodded as George pointed out the show lot. Groody cut the throttle to a thousand revolutions, and circled down in sweeping spirals as he surveyed the terrain for a landing field. He found one which looked available, next to the big show lot. Down in town the streets were filling with people whose eyes were turned upward at the gaudily painted ships, and down on the lot the several hundred onlookers who were watching the show go up transferred their attention to the sky.

The cook tent, Groody noticed, was already up, and the big top was flat on the ground, ready to rise.

He dropped his ship down low over the lot, and darted across it and then over his prospective field. It was smooth as a floor, and plenty large enough. He banked into the wind, cut his throttle all the way, and eased down across the fence for a perfect three-point landing. Corrigan followed within a half minute, and both eight cylinder motors were run out and the flyers out of their cockpits by the time the van of the crowd reached the field.

A stocky, fast-moving figure with flashing eyeglasses was first across the fence, and in a moment Service was shaking hands with big, black haired, rugged faced Corrigan.

"Greetings, Bob," Tom said casually. "How's Texas and the oil business?"

"Everything fine except capital, and it looks as though you boys had fixed that," grunted the huge ex-army pilot who was one of the five partners in the oil company.

"Whew!" breathed Service. "These sure are circus planes!"

The Jennies, slow, hundred and fifty horsepower ships which had been used for training cadets in the war, were painted blue and yellow; yellow wings and blue fuselages. "Gavin-Garfield Circus" was painted prominently on each side of both fuselages, and also on the lower sides of the bottom wings.

"Before anybody official comes around," Groody suggested, "tell us what's been happening, and what the lay is. What about O'Donnelly and Musselman?"

"Both recovered, but this show was sure hell while Bronk was away," Service said succinctly. "A bunch of canvasmen left. Bronk's the only one who can hold this madhouse down. We missed one town because we couldn't load fast enough, and in Hixville the show didn't get up until three in the afternoon and the matinée was ruined."

"O'Donnelly's apparently a keystone in the arch, eh?" ruminated Groody. "Well, what else?"

"Not a great deal. A lot of little things. As far as the killing of that trombone playing darky is concerned, it meant nothing except a lot of gossip, apparently. There's one girl—the one that does the jazz dance in the minstrel show—who seemed cut up about his being killed, and maybe she could say something or other but won't. Sweetheart of Hiram, I guess. The rest of the coons aren't much worse than they were, but the whole thing, to the show, is just another straw piled on the camel's back, see? Those that know about Hatwell being a detective are sore because the coon was killed.

"For another thing, seems there's a mob of grifters following the show and working the towns. The show gets credit for carrying 'em. On ahead the general agent can't get licenses for some good towns on that account. Evidently there's a possibility that the same people who are dogging this show are also smoking up this grifter thing to give the show a bad rep. Farrell explained that the days of 'strong shows' are over, and that all the big shows, this included, run clean as a whistle, and have for years. But this outfit's getting a rep all over as an old time strong mob."

"Well?" grunted Corrigan.

Service grinned ruefully.

"Not a one caught yet," he admitted "But next week, through a chief of polic that's friendly to Musselman, we think w can get hold of at least one crook and je the truth out of him—who he's working for, if anybody."

"How about the show itself?" queried Groody.

"Bad crowds. Musselman and Farrell fighting like wildcats the whole time and Bullion and the Pop MacDonald, the sideshow manager, siding with Farrell. Performers all wrought up. The new canvasmen who took the places of those that quit when O'Donnelly was beaten up are the toughest, most inefficient bunch I ever saw, and the show's right next door to the rocks. Farrell's a madman. He drives and curses and fires and seems to think that savage discipline and bawling out will just pull the show through and force it to be right."

CORRIGAN chewed ruminatively on a straw, his big dark eyes on the hundred or so people who were looking over the gaudy ships from a distance of fifty feet. The big airman was a curious type, to Groody. He was one man who approximated telling the exact truth about anyone or anything under any circumstances. He possessed the rare faculty of going straight to the heart of any proposition, and looking at it on its merits. His first mental move was to divest any person or subject of all trimmings and superficialities, and then he was not slow to express his opinion of what he found.

Groody would never forget a night in Texas when Corrigan had gone into personalities to explain himself. The big, roughhewn flyer was an artist, steadfastly doing enough magazine covers for cheap magazines to set his total income at $10,000 a year. Now that he was making money in oil, he never put brush to canvas.

"When I was a starved kid hobo I sat me down on the side of a railroad track and decided I'd lick the world that had been kicking me around," he stated. "I could draw some, and I starved until I got to making money and I didn't let a damn thing knock me off the trail. I can't draw anything but empty faced janes with good looking legs, and I know it. But by God I'm going to make $10,000 a year, live as I damn please, do what I damn please, and I don't kid myself.

"When I put in a mean leg or a bathing girl, I know why I'm doing it—to sell—and I don't call it art. When I buy a bottle of liquor, I know I'm no better than the man that's selling it, and I don't try to camouflage the issue by a lot of arguments about prohibition or anything else. And I don't look down too much on anybody from a crook to a murderer, because every one of those things I've been close to being myself—and so's every man. To hell with this combination of prejudice, self-kidding, and blind egotism that afflicts the so-called good citizens!"

And what he refused to do for himself he refused to do for others. No man or woman living could draw weasel words from Bob Corrigan.

"Well, Tom," he said abruptly, "what have you decided? An organized scheme? Or accidents in an unusual string?"

"Organized scheme," Tom said mildly, polishing his eyeglasses. "Someone has several employees of this show working for him or them, and others outside, like these grifters. The object is to ruin the show—bankrupt it by a series of disasters. For what purpose, I don't know."

"Any ideas about who it is?" Corrigan asked bluntly.

Tom nodded.

"A little hunch, maybe," he said gently. "But I won't say a word because it might prejudice you. What we've got to do is watch and wait, and grab somebody doing something. Then sweat it out of 'em. And we've got to work fast. Musselman says that two weeks more, like those that have passed, will wind up the show."

"What about these three detectives?" Groody inquired.

"They mooch around among the men. One's a property boy, another a canvasman, third a candy butcher. They work night and day, but they haven't spotted a thing. As I said, since I've been around there hasn't much happened except this outside stuff giving the show a tough name."

Corrigan's wiry black hair was waving in the breeze, and his lined, ruggedly comely face was the setting for a pair of eyes which were suddenly glowing.

"You said Farrell had gone wild, and was making things tougher by working too strong on the outfit," he said slowly. "Do you think——"

"Here he comes," Service warned in low tones.

From beneath the leghorn hat the soft voiced, granite faced manager's eyes were darting over the ships.

"Got here, eh?" he said gently, but his eyes were not good to see.

"Groody, how much is all this costing the show?"

That question shot out like a whiplash.

"Mr. Musselman agreed to our price," Groody said somewhat hesitantly. "If you ask him——"

"I'm asking you!"

The question itself meant that Musselman had not thought it best to confide in the manager. Which, Groody thought swiftly, was a hell of a situation. Farrell, it was plain, did not want the flying circus, or any detectives around. Which would seem to make certain inferences not too far fetched. Corrigan had got the same idea.

"I'll have to refer you to Mr. Musselman," Groody said flatly.

For a moment their eyes locked in a battle of wills. Groody knew, as surely as though the icelike showman had put it into words, that Farrell was his enemy.

"I see," Farrell said finally, and his lips were raised in a half snarl. The man looked as though he hadn't slept in a week. "I'm seeing plainer every day.

"Now listen."

He came closer, and his greenish-gray eyes darted from face to face.

"You're not listening to a part owner in this show, or a manager," he said tersely. "Neither one of those things, it seems, means a damn thing now. You're listening to Jack Farrell talking—personally. One wrong move from any one of you—and by God I'll kill you if I swing for it!"

Groody's lanky body did not lose its easy slouch.

"Mr. Farrell, that calls for an explanation," he said carefully as he took a cigar out of his pocket. "Come over here. I want one—and you'll get one from me, too!"

He turned, cigar in mouth, and stalked deliberately away from the crowd. Farrell followed him, watched by the owlish Service and the grimly smiling Corrigan. The crowd, sensing the conflict between the two men, buzzed excitedly.

OUT of earshot of anyone but themselves, Groody turned on the showman.

"Now listen, Farrell," he said calmly, emphasizing his words with that long cigar. "You just made what has all the earmarks of a dirty crack. And that doesn't go, understand? Just what excuse do you think you've got for remarking in your playful way that we're here to do something that we ought to be knocked off for? And manager or no manager, just how much of that stuff do you think you're going to get away with?"

Farrell gazed upward, without speaking, into the narrow lines of gray light which were Groody's eyes. Groody's face was hard and set, and an observer who knew nothing whatever of the situation could have sensed in a moment the deadly enmity between the two men. And neither of them was a weakling.

Farrell held his peace, and there was something scornful and savagely contemptuous in the measuring of his eyes.

"Saying nothing, eh?" commented Groody. "Well, I'll say something. In the first place, we came on here to offer our professional services in two ways. They were accepted, by the big boss."

"How long ago?"

"The day we came on the lot, of course."

"I don't suppose you ever saw or heard of Musselman before!"

"No, we didn't."

Farrell's smile was a sneer, and he shrugged his powerful shoulders. His immaculate blue shirt and necktie contrasted oddly with his unshaven face and lightly bloodshot eyes.

"Believe it or not, I don't care," Groody told him.

The loose jointed flyer knew that perhaps his best course of procedure now was what Musselman had outlined: namely, labeling himself as Musselman's enemy, and striving to insinuate himself into the good graces of the old-timers who hated the idea of Musselman's domination of the show. Nevertheless, the streak of perverse audacity in Groody had been uncovered by the events of the past few minutes, and, as he had done before in similar situations, he decided in a split second to conduct a mental experiment and shoot the works on a chance.

With great deliberation he inhaled a sizable lungful of smoke, removed the cigar, and allowed his body to become even more relaxed. Then his heavy lidded eyes met the manager's squarely, and the blaze in them was the reflection of the savage delight he felt in moments like this when important matters depended on the events of a few seconds.

"I'm going to go even further, Mister Farrell," he said quietly. "In fact, I'm going to state plainly that there are a hell of a lot of men around this show from whom I'd take a covy of insinuations with more grace than from you. Tom Service hasn't been idle the last few days.

"You had your chance with this show, without Musselman being around, didn't you? And since he's been around you've fought him—and carried your men with you, haven't you? And it's a cinch that some man or men are out to make the show not only valueless, but representing a loss in lawsuits, at least, isn't it? And from the way this unknown has worked he knows the outdoor show business from A to Z, doesn't he?

"Furthermore, for the last few weeks you've been such a loony lunatic around that you've got everybody still further on edge than they would have been otherwise, haven't you? Whatever Musselman figures out, like hiring detectives, or special attractions, you've fought, haven't you?

"And in conclusion," here Groody leaned forward, "all these things, together with some others that I won't mention, just cause me to state that whatever you think about what's going on in your own show doesn't amount to a single, solitary damn with me!"

The manager was like a statue. Not by so much as the flicker of an eyelash did he betray emotion. And yet Groody felt, as his eyes probed into the opaque gray ones of the showman, that Farrell was gathering himself together, like a rattlesnake coiling. Never had the flyer met a man whose hidden strength of purpose was so great that the emanation of it was like a physical manifestation. And with every passing moment he was respecting more the temper of the manager's steel.

When Farrell did speak, the words were so gentle, the voice so soft, that it was a shock.

"You people, I take it, think that I am responsible for the condition of the show? And for what purpose?"

His face was whitening, now, and Groody noticed a certain quiver in his body.

"Suppose," the flyer said casually, "you wanted to buy the other seventy-five per cent of the show for almost nothing?"

Slowly Farrell pushed back that flat leghorn hat from his face, his eyes staring into Groody's with what amounted to madness in them. Then a film seemed to drop over them, and suddenly they were cold and passionless and unreadable. He expelled his breath in a long sigh, and turned away.

But this the flyer knew as he walked toward the ships: that it was time to consider the job at hand as one of almost deadly seriousness as far as he personally was concerned, and not an interesting lark; that Jack Farrell was next door to a madman, right then; and that such a foeman as he might prove to be had not crossed Groody's path before; and that for a second during that interview, at least, murder had been peering forth from Farrell's eyes.

CHAPTER XI

GROODY CRASHES

"WHAT about it?" grunted Corrigan when he returned.

Groody surveyed the spectators calmly, and then his eyes shifted to the scene of Gargantuan industry which was the circus lot. Cook tent and sideshow top were both up, and the big top, attached to the four iron bailrings around the center poles, had been drawn up and the sidewall poles were in place. From center poles to sidewall the top sagged, but the quarter poles were in place and being drawn up straight to hold the huge canvas roof taut from center to edge. A continuous stream of wagons was still entering the lot, each vehicle finding its appointed place as soon as its load was discharged. Sixteen elephants were lined up in the open between the ships and the big top, pending the erection of the menagerie. The other two beasts were working, drawing up the quarter poles. The gaudily painted menagerie wagons were lining up for the parade which would take place in an hour. The midway was well defined as the refreshment booths sprang into being like mushrooms. In an hour the great show would be up—in shape to give a show, if necessary, within four hours of its arrival aboard the train.

The vague bellow of O'Donnelly's voice, the continuous racket of the working hundreds, and the smell of the show which came wafting over from the lot aroused in the thirty-odd year old flyer some of the boyish fascination which is the inalienable right of childhood, and even of maturity. For the first time, he was conscious of the fact that he wanted to do something for this great family of showmen, for the institution itself. The job ahead became more personal to him, as though he was performing a service for an old and valued friend.

"Well?" repeated Corrigan bruskly. "How did you and Farrell make out?"

"I don't know," Groody said frankly, replacing the cigar in one corner of his mouth. "I may have pulled a hell of a bone, and then again I may have been smarter than a college sophomore thinks he is."

Tom Service's gray eyes glinted, but he waited silently.

"Farrell, of course," Groody reminded Corrigan, "is twenty-five per cent owner of this show. Likewise, things happened to it under his exclusive management. His men, like the bosses and performers, are with him. When Musselman was sent on, everybody, under Farrell's leadership, started fighting him.

"And he's down on us, of course. So when things got a little hot, in our confab, I just suddenly decided to run a bluff. Get in the first shot. And he, mind you, said that if we tried to pull anything to harm the show he'd kill us, and all that stuff. Insinuating that we were here for some ulterior purpose, because we're labeled Musselman men.

"So I merely summed up the situation, and insinuated with considerable force that Farrell had better watch his own backyard and not be throwing any mud at Musselman and us. I suggested, in fact, that maybe the twenty-five per cent owner of this show wanted to buy the other seventy-five per cent for almost nothing, and that an attempt from within to damage it might bring about that purpose."

When he finished, Tom Service stared at him, round-eyed. Corrigan's heavy eyebrows were drawn together in a frown of concentration as his eyes rested on the aquiline face before him.

"How did this shot in the dark work?" he demanded.

"I'll be damned if I know, exactly," Groody responded with a mirthless grin. "I think it hit him amidships. He couldn't say a word. And I'm sure that he could have wrung my neck and hung me out to dry with pleasure."

"It strikes me," said the forthright Corrigan bluntly, "that you pulled a hell of a bone. If Farrell's at the head of all this stuff, which does seem possible, you've scared him out of keeping it up so we can catch him. And if he isn't, we've made a damn powerful enemy."

"Maybe so," Groody agreed tranquilly. "But everything points to him. Tom says that for the last week he's been like a wasp bothering this show, driving everybody insane. Acting so damned hardboiled that he almost seems to be trying to drive 'em out. And I figured a bluff might scare him into the open. Even if we've scared him out of pulling any more stuff it won't be such a bad day's work."

"Except that if he's that kind of a bird he'll be laying to get rid of us at the first opportunity," snorted Corrigan. "And we're flying airplanes, and getting us into a heap of trouble wouldn't be hard, by any means! Did you figure that he may be laying his planks to wipe us off the earth, as having dangerous knowledge of his game?"

"No I didn't," the lanky flyer confessed, and then his thin lips drooped in that one-sided grin. "That idea, though, has its points. Hell, this might turn into an honest-to-God——"

"Picnic!" Corrigan filled in for him. The big airman took a step forward, and shook one big finger in the sardonic Groody's face. "Listen here, George, don't try to kid yourself or us! You're just getting more perverse every day you live, and more impatient. You just spilled your wad to Farrell because you wanted to start things moving quick and sudden, and you did it without any deep figuring or anything else. You couldn't ease around and watch and wait and all that. Any day that goes by without a hell of a lot happening is just a loss to you. And you pulled a bone, either way you take it, unless what you said resulted in nailing Farrell right to the cross without a shadow of doubt—which it didn't!

"I don't give a damn, but you might just as well realize that this cursed restlessness, impatience, willingness to shoot the works on a shadow of a chance, is growing on you—and for Pete's sake don't try to kid us about it!"

"Corrigan's right, George," Service said mildly. "For the love of Mike settle down a while and enjoy yourself and don't try to do everything in a minute so you can get somewhere else and try something new! Give us time, my boy, give us time!"

No one knew Groody better than Service.

Groody took a long breath, and suddenly his face relaxed a bit and there was an unwontedly soft look in his eyes.

"Guilty," he grinned, and for a moment the boyishness which was usually hidden by the hard crust he showed the world was discernible in him. "I see now that bracing Farrell that way was just my cursed foolishness—impatience, or whatever you call it. But it's done now. By the way, did the Wardell troupe stick?"

"Yes," Tom nodded. "And Eddie Wardell and his bunch are pretty strong, in a way, for Musselman now. Musselman tried his best to persuade 'em to lay off a while, at good money, until things were cleaned up. They've cut the blindfolded stuff, but are doing the rest of their act. But, like the animal people and all the rest, they're working as though the old Scratch was right behind 'em and every stunt a life and death matter. There's a bunch of folks in this show that're due to crack pretty soon if the jinx doesn't come out into the open."

"Here comes Musselman," Groody remarked. "Somebody with him. By the way, they're raising a flag over the cookhouse. What does that mean?"

"That breakfast is ready," Service informed him. "The workmen don't get any breakfast until the show's up. And that fellow with Musselman may be Young, that nephew flyer of his. He was due this morning."

THE general manager, freshly shaven and looking as cool and immaculate in his Palm Beach outfit as though he'd stepped from his own apartment instead of a crowded circus train, waved to Groody, and then said something to the man with him.

And that same man caused Groody's eyes to focus on him with some intensity. The chap was worthy of detailed scrutiny, in his own right, but there was something vaguely familiar about him that sent the pilot's mind coursing hither and yon in an attempt to place him.

"Looks like a matinée idol," came Service's voice. "What a swath he'll cut among the ballet girls!"

Which seemed very possible. Dressed in khaki riding breeches, soft shirt open at the neck, and a pair of pliable field boots, the stranger was an arresting sight in the flooding sunlight which turned his curly blond hair into a flaming aureole. His face was unlined, and the setting for a pair of blue eyes which flashed and sparkled with vitality. His jaw and short, slightly aquiline nose combined with his wide mouth to give an impression of strength and decision which were in curious contrast to the wide, boyish eyes. When he laughed, which was frequently, white teeth flashed in the sun and his whole being seemed to radiate careless, devil-may-care zest and enjoyment in life for its own sake. The impression he gave was that of a man with such vibrant vitality that it overflowed in electric waves and galvanized the air in his vicinity.

"That bozo looks like a healthy college boy I've seen before," ruminated Groody. "No, I'll be damned if he's any college boy, either!"

It was surprising, at that. In an instant, it seemed, as the stranger got close enough for detailed inspection, his age seemed to increase by ten years. Fine lines around the eyes, and others from nostrils to mouth which gave a certain strained expression to his face were part of it. There were deep hollows below his high cheekbones, and the eyes, now that Groody could probe them deeply, did not reflect eager youth. They had seen things, those quizzical eyes had.

"Greetings," called Musselman, and came forward to shake hands with Groody. "This is Corrigan, eh? Well, this is Brad Young, the other flyer."

When Young shook hands with a warm, tingling grip that reminded Groody of the feeling one had during a very weak electric shock, his dazzling smile was backed up by an expression in his eyes which indicated that Young was enjoying some private joke of his own.

"Know me, Groody?" he inquired.

"I think I've seen your map before, but I'll be damned if I know where," stated Groody.

"You were combât instructor at Issoudun before you started knocking over Germans, weren't you? Well, I was one of your students."

Groody nodded.

"That's it, I guess."

"That looks as though it might be the same cigar we cadets used to see sticking out of the side of your mouth when you were riding our tails into the ground," laughed Young.

It was funny, Groody thought, how that contagious laugh changed Young. In repose, his face was mature and strong. When he threw back his head, he was the incarnation of zestful youth.

"Well, the flag's up," Musselman stated. "Who's going to eat?"

"Corrigan and I have had breakfast," Groody told him.

"And I," Young put in.

"Then Tom and I'll put on the feedbag alone," Musselman told them.

"Corrigan and Young and I will get busy," Groody informed him. "As I understand it, we give an advance exhibition this afternoon in the next town, if everything's all right, and start regular schedule tomorrow. Right?"

Musselman nodded, his prominent eyes studying Groody steadily.

"I saw you talking to Farrell from a distance," he said suddenly. "Anything special?"

With a glance at the increasing crowd, now pressing closer to the ships, Groody stepped forward and told the story in low tones. Musselman's dark eyes seemed to redden stormily, and his black eyebrows drew together as he listened.

"If I dared, I'd get rid of him entirely," he gritted. "But the show would follow him. It's just a question of getting absolute proof. From now on, you're no friends of mine. Young isn't my nephew. Service knows everything about what's coming off in Hinton, a week from now, so you won't need to consult me. I'll be working, of course. The detectives are under you, though, and I'll play a lone hand. Whenever we have to see each other, we won't be friendly. We'll talk only in public, and on business, when I want to give you an order or something. Tom, we'd better start right now, and eat separately."

All this was said swiftly. He walked off rapidly, and in a moment Service started for the cook tent more leisurely.

"Now, Young, how much flying have you done in the last year?" demanded Groody.

"Plenty," the blond pilot returned airily. "I'm a reserve officer, and I've been hopping around almost every week over in Chicago."

"All right. In a minute we'll go up and I'll check you off just because I happen to be the bird whose neck is involved."

"Since when did you start all this daredevil acrobatic stuff?" Young inquired quizzically, and Groody shrugged his bony shoulders.

"Just now," he grunted. "Climbing around a ship doesn't amount to a damn, and I'll have a parachute for some of the stuff. And I won't do anything too hard. Used to have a little fun riding the wings when life got monotonous, and now that there's a chance for a hell of a big salary, and I need the money badly, why I'm perfectly willing to take a chance."

He didn't add that it would supply a few thrills which would be like so many drinks of water to a man dying of thirst.

"Here's the dope," Groody went on incisively. "The advertising flight each afternoon in the town ahead will be made by Corrigan and I. I'll simply climb around his ship a little, and then we drop a lot of dodgers. Early each afternoon, to help the matinée performance, we'll do our real stuff, low. It'll be climbing around a ship a little—Corrigan's ship. Then a transfer from Corrigan's ship to yours, using a cable ladder I brought along. All you'll have to do is fly straight and level; Corrigan will do the jockeying for position to get me to the ladder which'll be hanging from your ship. Your job is just straight flying, and your salary's a hundred a week. O.K.?"

"Right as rain," grinned Young. "I'd work for nothing. Mr. Musselman's told me the lay, and I just left a good job in Chi for this troupe to see what I can see."

"Looks as though we might see plenty," Corrigan said gruffly. "I haven't looked over the show much, but enough's been done this morning to give me a good idea about it."

"Just how are you going to work?" inquired Young. "And what do I do aside from flying?"

"That'll be decided later, when we get a talk with Service," Groody told him. "Let's go up and get it over with. No insult to your flying, you understand, but I want to see for myself what you can do."

CORRIGAN pulled the propeller through, with Groody at the throttle in the front seat. The Jenny cockpits were arranged with the instruments for the pilot in the rear seat, so that Groody, in front would have an easier task climbing to the wings. As Young climbed in the rear cockpit Corrigan cleared the field, and after a brief warm-up Groody gave the signal to take off.

Slouched easily in the front seat, his hand holding the stick lightly to feel the pulse of Young's flying, Groody concentrated on his inspection of the ebullient new man's airmanship. Almost before the ship was off the ground, he had given his O.K.

Young slid the throttle forward smoothly and without haste, something many veteran flyers never learn to do. His handling of the stick as he pushed the nose down was sure and even, without a trace of overcontrol. He held the Jenny on the ground until excess flying speed was attained, and then took it off in a conservative climb which sent it across the boundary fence with ample clearance and an abundance of flying speed. He waited until he was a hundred feet high to bank, and then made the turn without slip or skid. Without instruction from Groody he circled for altitude, and there was in his flying an effortless ease and sureness which is the mark of experience plus born aptitude for the air.

At four hundred feet he started across the lot while Groody gazed down at the scene. All the tents, from the horse top in the rear to the smaller canvas structures inside the backyard, were up. Fifty or more wagons dotted the lot in seeming confusion, but he knew that there was none.

They had just cleared the lot, and were flying over the low hills, when Groody decided that the test was over. He wanted to get down and start mingling with the show immediately.

One long arm shot out in the signal to turn back to the field. Then his loose jointed body snapped into taut alertness, and his head thrust forward. The motor was spitting like mad.

As he grabbed for the stick, it died completely.

In a second the cursing pilot had picked the only possible landing field, and that field, save for a miracle, meant a crackup. They were not high enough to turn back to the temporary airdrome, and all around them were low hills, sprinkled with trees. One open spot, barely fifty yards long but sloping steeply upward, represented their only chance to save themselves. The ship, almost inevitably, would be wrecked.

As he started to move the stick, he found that it would not answer. He tugged at it savagely, but still it would not move. Young had tight hold of it.

He turned, and his shout was audible above the whine of the wires and the low noise of the prop, whirring lazily in the airstream.

"Give it to me!" he roared.

He could scarcely believe his eyes as Young shook his head decidedly. The blond flyer pointed to himself wordlessly, his blue eyes glinting coldly behind the oversized goggles.

Groody wrenched savagely at the stick. It was his ship, and the landing which was just about fifteen seconds ahead was as hard a task as comes a flyer's way in a blue moon.

Young's grip was unshaken. Savage fury flamed in Groody's heart, and he darted a look around the cockpit for a weapon. Then he bethought him of the Pyrene, which he could use as an emergency weapon, and in a second had the fire extinguisher wrenched from its clamps. He loosened his belt, and half rose.

As he turned there was burnt on his memory, never to be erased, the picture of a new Young. Lips drawn back in a snarl, the lines on his lean face etched deep, the new flyer was like a pale demon. And the wrench he was swinging was within inches of Groody's helmeted head. George started to dodge, but was too late. A little of the force of the blow was dissipated, but nevertheless his body slumped and, although only dazed mentally, he was unable to move.

For the next few seconds he fought for consciousness. A terrific blast of air hit him on the right cheek. Young was sideslipping downward. The ship straightened, and then slipped off on the other side. It was a whirling nightmare to the helpless ace, and the shrill of the wires was like the song of exultant furies.

Suddenly there was a shock. The wheels hit. The ship had bounced. Groody tried to move, but could not. His belt was not around him.

It hit again. There was a racking, scraping sound, as the right wing dragged the ground in a tight groundloop. Then a terrific jar. He was vaguely aware that the sky seemed to be turning around his head. The undercarriage had hit something—the ship was going on its back——

He subconsciously loosened his muscles. Then, because he had no belt, he was half hurled, half dropped to the ground, and the last remnant of consciousness left him to the accompaniment of rending linen and splintering wood and the clang of metal.

IT COULD not have been more than a quarter of a minute later when he came to, and awakened to find himself in hell. Terrific heat was searing him. Spurred by the horror of his predicament, his body seemed to tense and spring within a split second. But one leg was caught; he could not move. Frantically he heaved at the wreckage surrounding him as the stifling smoke filled his eyes and lungs.

"All right, Groody!" came a panting voice, and the next second the torn linen was stripped from his head.

Young, helmet off and hair touseled, was like a raging fury of the fire. His shirt was smoking, his eyebrows charred, as he dug away frantically. With one mighty heave, hands to the red hot motor, he had shoved it an inch to the right, and the next second, losing no precious time by running around the fire, to the other side, he had plunged straight through it to Groody.

He lifted George with effortless strength, and in a moment had him on the ground a safe distance away. Then he calmly beat out two embryo fires in his trousers, and white teeth flashed across his grimy face.

"And that's that!" he laughed, hands on hips.

It seemed that all of Groody's senses came back to him at once. For a moment he surveyed the smoldering fire. The fuselage had buckled behind the front cockpit, and only the motor and the front cockpit were ablaze. Without a word he sprang forward, and was stamping out the flames to keep them from the rear cockpit, fuselage and wings. His action was automatic and pretty largely useless, for the ship was ruined, anyhow.

His furious activity did not calm the storm within him, however, nor did the thought of Young's nervy work to save him cause his heart to soften. Bleak faced and icily collected, he slowly walked toward his employee, who was now puffing a cigaret with great enjoyment. Such burns as he had were apparently very small things in the newcomer's life.

"Young, I ought to, and have a good mind to, lick you within an inch of your life!" Groody told him slowly.

Young's smile flashed again, but there was little real mirth in it.

"The hell you say!" he shot back. "Who was pilot of this ship?"

"You were, but I happened to be its owner, and your boss!"

For a moment Young, confident to impudence, matched eyes with the flyer who was surveying him with cold rage. There was something mockingly at ease in the new man's attitude that Groody forgot his wrath, momentarily, to speculate about his adversary. There was plenty of iron in Mr. Brad Young.

Suddenly Young threw down his cigaret, flipping it away with an airy grace which was evident in every move of his broad shouldered body. His hand was thrust forward, and now that radiant smile was strangely winning.

"Groody, I shouldn't have done it, and I apologize," he said easily. "I forgot the circumstances. I'm like most flyers. I want the stick when there's a hard job ahead. And I'm accustomed to have it—and I *was* the pilot.

"But I should have let you have it, instead of losing my head. I know what every flyer who ever went through Issoudun knew long before you started knocking over Boche like a bowling ball does ten pins. You were, and probably still are, the greatest flyer that ever sat behind a windshield. That means more than owning the ship, or being my boss. I'd crack that combination on the conk any time a forced landing came up.

"But under the circumstances, hop to it and lick me all you want to. I won't even fight back."

"That," commented Groody with deliberation, "leaves me in a hell of a pickle. So we'll let the matter drop."

This Young was a queer chap, he was thinking. Plenty of guts, a good flyer, and apparently without fear of man or devil.

"By the way," Groody went on. "that

was a poor piece of landing you did. One log on this hillside, in plain sight, and you had to hit it and turn a two thousand dollar ship over."

"Right you are," admitted Young with a grin. "But I was so busy knocking you cuckoo that I didn't have time to take detailed observations. However, I'll try to make up for it. I'll see Musselman and get him to stake you to a new ship, and I imagine he'll pay you full salary for just working with one until we get a new one. You can do your jumping and wingwalking and all that. The suckers'll like it just as well."

Groody scarcely heard the last part of Young's statement. For the second time he noted that Young called his uncle "Musselman" instead of "Uncle Fred".

"You don't talk like a nephew," he observed. "Musselman sounds——"

Young laughed.

"I scarcely have seen him for fifteen years, and in the shape he's in he appears like a stranger," he answered. "Just doesn't seem natural to call him 'uncle.'"

"Well, you go on down to the lot and tell 'em to send a truck up here," Groody ordered, his eyes on the wreck. "I'll wait here. The roads over there a hundred yards or so. We might as well salvage as much as we can."

"Right-o!" returned Young, and strode off down the steep slope, whistling merrily.

Groody went over the wreck, and poked around the charred motor. That complete cutout, and the ensuing beginnings of a fire, spelled one thing: broken gas line. And it was peculiar that a brand new motor should have trouble like that after less than ten hours' flying.

So he looked around with minute care. The turnover hadn't damaged the motor, and the flames had played only over its surface. When he got to what he wanted to see he looked a long time, and his lids drooped lower and lower and his jutting profile resembled that of a bird of prey. His groping hand found a cigar, which he thrust into his mouth unlighted.

"In the first place," he told himself grimly, "it isn't possible. In the second place, here it is, impossible or not. In the third place . . .

"How the hell can anybody, including Tom Service, figure out an explanation that'd cover everything?"

CHAPTER XII

A TRAP IS SET

GROODY, Service and Corrigan were the sole occupants of the vast expanse of blue and yellow plank seats which rimmed the inside of the big top. The five o'clock supper was over. The cook tent was being taken down and packed, as were the horse tents, but the big top was almost deserted. In one end ring Hodgkins, sire and star of the Hodgkins riding troupe, was rehearsing his fourteen year old son. The youngster was practicing a running mount, varying that strenuous exercise with backflips which never seemed to suit his father. In the other end ring, Ed Wardell was watching a trim girl in rompers who was practicing dropping into the net from a low trapeze. The Wardell troupe was always "breaking in" new performers. On the track, which was outlined by two concentric rows of quarter poles, Kate Bullion, the pretty wife of the assistant manager, was schooling a horse to dance; but there seemed little gusto in her efforts. The loss of Sir Martin still lay heavily on her. Over in the entrance to the backyard, George Byers, assistant equestrian director, announcer, and ballet master, was striving to inculcate into an ex-shop girl the rudiments of the far from complicated steps executed by the sixty ballet girls in the "sumptuous, stunning, supreme apex of all spectacles" which opened the show.

"Shoot, Tom," commanded Groody. "We're among friends, so to speak. Young sure kicked at having to go after the new plane, didn't he?"

"He seemed to want to be in on any excitement," agreed Service. "Did I understand you to say that we draw full pay for the one ship?"

"We do," assented Groody. "This Musselman boy sure does lean over backwards to treat his performers right. It's almost a shame to take the money. And, by the same token, I've generated an idea which I might as well expound, before Tom gives us the detailed dope. Just to help out the show and get ourselves in solid, if that's possible. How about advertising ahead in each town that if the total advance sale, in the town ticket office in the morning, reaches a certain amount, I'll make a parachute jump directly over the town from ten thousand feet? That ought to get 'em smoked up, hadn't it?"

"Good," Tom Service nodded. "We'll be in flat country for a while, all through Ohio. A little later let's get the bunch of bosses and managers together and put it up to 'em."

"That being settled," said Groody, "let's find out where we stand and generate our campaign."

Both he and Corrigan held their peace thereafter, for two reasons. One was that Tom Service had been with the show ten days, and knew conditions. The other was that, granted approximately the same amount of information as anyone else, the stocky ex-sleuth's traplike mind could examine, pigeonhole and then put facts together in logical order with amazing clarity.

"There's very little you don't know," Tom said quietly. "The history of the show all season, with and without Musselman, has been one of disaster. Poor business due to weather can be laid to acts of God. The other disasters are in three classes. Inexplicable accidents, apparently trivial in themselves, resulting unluckily in heavy damage suits which aggregate a couple of hundred thousand dollars right now, with good chances for collection. That's straight from Daddy Mettal, the legal adjuster with the show. He's been a showman all over the world for fifty years, and knows his stuff. He agrees that as far as the accidents go, it just isn't possible that they were all accidents.

"Second: happenings which lose the show valuable property, as well as weakening its performance and the morale of the kinkers—that's what these people call performers—and the men. These things all center on the animals. Poisoning, mainly. Over thirty thousand dollars' worth of cats, horses, and various other animals have been lost that way.

"Third: the real ugly personal stuff. Four canvasmen found murdered for no observable reason. This mysterious attack on Musselman and O'Donnelly. That failure of the Wardell apparatus that you and I were in on, Groody.

"The result of all this is a weak show, with the performers nervous and on edge, canvasmen leaving rapidly and being replaced by amateur bums, Farrell one jump ahead of a fit and trying to drive his show over the top by main strength, resulting in making the morale worse. Then the Musselman feud with all the rest of the show, purely because he's considered an outsider. They all add up to a traveling madhouse which is giving a rotten performance, and resembles a volcano liable to go into eruption at any minute. The executives, as well as Farrell, are in such shape that they work their people too savagely, bawl 'em out too much, and all that. It's a never ending circle which gets worse every time around. Add to the whole thing this outside stuff, the fact that a gang of thugs is working on the trail of the show, getting it a bad rep, and that perhaps other interests, working quietly, are helping poison towns on the route against the outfit, and you've got a picture of why the Gavin-Garfield show is at present about half as good as it could be, and is on the verge of bankruptcy."

There was no trace of the mild hesitancy which usually marked the ex-Federal man's speech, and his eyes were not so vacuously round. They were glowing softly behind the horn-rimmed glasses, and his incisive words came in crisp sequence as he went on:

"It seems to be a leadpipe cinch that there is a definite plan, worked out and led by experienced showmen, to wreck the Gavin-Garfield show. The object might be revenge, to stamp out the whole shebang as a competitor, or to so disgust, even bankrupt, its owners that it can be bought for a song. As far as revenge goes, there seems no basis for it. But, of course, I may be wrong about that. Competition: the only shows competing in any way with the second largest circus in the world are outfits owned by men of reputation, and it seems utterly ridiculous to think of any other outfit pulling this stuff. Which leaves the third possibility. And it seems that the third possibility, if true, narrows down to two probabilities. First and most reasonable: that Jack Farrell, twenty-five per cent owner now, wants to own the whole outfit, wants to get it cheap and on easy terms, and is heading the plot. The other is that some unknown outsider wants to buy the show very cheaply. The majority owner, of course, can be let out. He wouldn't ruin his own property for the sake of getting hold of Farrell's twenty-five per cent."

GROODY'S eyes were resting on Ed Wardell, now swinging on the low trapeze himself to illustrate exactly what portion of the back a landing could be made on most advantageously. Little Hodgkins was standing erect on the horse, galloping around the ring. Byers, sweating profusely, had apparently decided that the one step which his new coryphee had learned was all she could comprehend in one day, and was lying in a canvas chair out in the backyard.

"What do you make of the little incident this afternoon?" Groody inquired. "That feedline didn't break. It was sawed in two as clean as a whistle!"

"Which holds two possiblities," Corrigan pointed out. "One is that Young did it after the wreck. He could have turned off the gas from the back cockpit to make the landing, then sawed the feedline. The only object of that stuff, though, would be to safely kill you. Which he didn't want to do, because he saved your life. If his object was merely to destroy the ship, in order to hold us back in our supposed business of helping the show's profits, he wouldn't have sawed the feedline after he'd wrecked the ship."

"Which all presupposes that that blithsome chap is not with us, but ag'in us," Tom pointed out.

"Of course, which seems absurd on its face," agreed Corrigan. "The other chance is that the feedline was carefully sawed almost in two before the takeoff, left so nearly cut through that the vibration would be sure to break it in flight, with the result being a fire in the air as well as a forced landing. And Young, naturally, couldn't be responsible for that, because he was going up in the plane himself."

"On that basis," Service put in, "some outsider, in the pay of this unknown gang, done the dirty deed. And I'll be totally and completely damned if any living soul had a chance to do it from the time that Groody landed until he took off!

"Well," continued Tom, "there are several people in this show who're in the pay of whoever the enemy is. Likewise, there are a good many people connected with the show that we don't know, and it's almost a cinch that one of them is getting in some dirty work."

"What do you mean?" barked Groody.

"Listen, and then see whether you all agree with me on what I've decided about these unknowns. You all know that the show's lost several towns—couldn't get a license—because a mob of grifters, without the knowledge of the show, have been working the towns the show plays and given it a bad reputation. In some cases where the license has been refused, it looks as though somebody in said town had all the information there was, and a good deal that there isn't.

"I've been looking up the advance crew of the show, and it's a big organization in itself. In the first place there's a general agent, in general charge in the main office. He looks over the territory months in advance, picks the route and arranges the railroad schedules. The show may be booked anywhere from twenty days to four months in advance. He's Number One.

"The next birds through are a couple of local contractors. They arrange for the lot, bill posting locations, get general information, and so forth. They're as far ahead as they can get—around six weeks, on an average.

"Then there are a couple of billing cars, one a week ahead and the other two weeks ahead. About forty bill posters and a press agent.

"The next number in the parade is a press agent. They call him the seven day story man. He plants stories in the papers. Then comes the twenty-four hour man. He looks over the lot, checks up the general agent's work, lays out the route from train to lot by arrows, and a lot of other stuff.

"Bringing up the rear are the checkers-up, a day ahead. They check up the bill posting, give out passes for the location owners, and all that stuff. There's also a country route rider, to go out through outlying districts and check up the billing. Likewise there's a banner man ahead. He contracts with business men to take advertising banners in the parade, which are later hung in the big top during the shows.

"Now the point is that some one of these birds, or maybe more, are in the pay of the enemy. It seems a cinch that one of 'em, drifting through the towns, gets to a chief of police here or there that'll listen to reason and fixes the no license stuff. In other towns, where they're on the square, he just gives the show a bad rep and they run into a whale of a lot of trouble, everywhere from the newspapers to local business men and churches and all that.

"My mind's made up on that point. But we can't be everywhere in the world at once. And it would take a whale of a lot of time, traveling and gumshoeing on the back trail to uncover anything, and it would take an army to shadow everybody in that advance crew to see who was getting in the dirty work.

"I've pretty well decided, for the present, to center operations on the show itself. Do you agree?"

"Sure," stated Corrigan, "unless Musselman wants to hire some city police force to follow that army around."

"It's always an ace in the hole for us," Groody pointed out, "And we can start that stuff any time we can get the men to do it. But it's a sure thing that there's more booty around the show than there is ahead, behind, or in the middle. I think you're right, Thomas my boy."

"Good. Now about the show, then. Those three dicks—all hardboiled old-timers familiar with outdoor show work—haven't found out a thing except that one coon, named Hiram, was fiddling with some knives and that the knives went bad right after that. And he's dead. All that shows is that the men we're after may be of the humblest. Any canvasman, black or white, or a waiter in the privilege car. Likewise, somebody big at the head thereof. And some able men masquerading as laborers, probably."

"Have you given a glance at the—er—executives, so to speak?" Groody inquired.

"As much as I could, and I've got the lowdown on 'em from Bronk, mostly, and Musselman.

"The birds who can be called 'big' start with the manager and his assistant. Under 'em there are three main departments, you see—the business side, the big top organization, and the sideshow. The treasurer and secretary are like clerks, of course. On the sideshow there's Pop MacDonald, secretary, and the boss canvasman.

"The big top's the main thing. There you've got all kinds of executives, from the man in charge of the front door to an auditor, in the business part. Inside, there are three big boys. That's the guy in charge of concessions, the boss of the menagerie tent, and the boss canvasman. Listen to the lineup—boss elephant man, boss usher, boss property man, four assistants to O'Donnelly, equestrian director and his assistant to run off the show, boss hostler, blacksmith, sailmaker, et cetera.

"And every last one of these men, no matter how small a boss he may be, has had a spotless reputation in the show business for from ten years to forty. Not one breath can we get against 'em, outside of the fact that about all the real old-timers who started with wagon shows that had to fight their way from coast to coast partook of the nature of the profession, which was to take all the money there was out of town by hook or crook. But they've all changed with the times, and not a one was ever a double-crosser.

"In other words, there's not a base to start on," Tom finished.

"Of course, everybody has to start wrong—there's a first time," ruminated Groody.

"It's to be assumed," Tom went on, "that everyone in the troupe who's on the square is watching closely; and they haven't put their fingers on anything yet. If Jack Farrell heads the crooked gang, he's got the loyalty of so many people, partly because Musselman's so unpopular, that one really wouldn't be justified in counting anybody as above suspicion, from Bullion down. And yet Bullion's wife's favorite horse was poisoned—which is typical of the situation all along the line. I mean that any explanation is directly contradicted, and made to seem unreasonable, by other facts. The episode of that forced landing this afternoon is merely another illustration. The only man who would seem responsible is Young. And yet Young saved Groody's life and the whole thing seems absolutely unexplainable.

"However, my going to Chicago this evening and getting the Federal boys there to give me a hand in looking up everybody can't do any harm and may do some good. My idea is that we won't find out a great deal until we hit this town of Hinton, where Musselman has the chief of police all primed to cooperate and where there's a good chance of picking up some of these outside grifters, at least. If Groody's idea of the parachute jump goes across, and we lay a trap that they fall into before Hinton, so much the better. But I strongly doubt the possibility of our getting anywhere and picking up any one of the gang in the act of doing something."

"I've got an idea which might help on Farrell," announced Corrigan. "How about you boys cashing in on the little favor you did for Wardell when you caught his wife? He's a friend of Farrell's, isn't he, and likewise above suspicion?"

A MOMENT later, as Wardell was starting to leave the tent, Groody yelled to him. The stocky acrobat promptly came over to the seats.

"Sit down, Mr. Wardell," Service invited. "We want to ask a favor of you."

Wardell smiled slowly. He was fundamentally a very shy man, despite his fame, and in his khaki trousers and flannel shirt looked like a farm hand.

"I sure would be glad to help you out," he said in his high voice.

"Mr. Wardell," Service said directly, "you know that we're here to help business, if we can, through our flying circus, and also to act as detectives, trying to nail the man or men responsible for the condition of the show."

Wardell nodded. He seemed slightly uneasy, Groody noticed.

"We think that we have uncovered what may be a possible solution. The man we have in mind must be watched without his knowing it, in order to prove or disprove our suspicions. We want you to do the watching, because you can do it without being suspected. I've been around this business just long enough to know that real troupers are loyal to their show above anything else—and this is surely a time when a man ought to do anything he can to help out."

"Right you are," agreed Wardell, "and I'll go the limit. Somethin's gotta be done soon."

"Absolutely," Service cut in. "And we can safely say this: That whoever is uncovered as part of the gang that are responsible for what's been happening won't be any small toad in the puddle—and his identity'll probably be a surprise."

Wardell nodded.

"In the old days it might 'a' been another show, but not now," he commented. From the distance came the blare of the tireless sideshow band, and he had to raise his voice a trifle as he went on: "What do you want me to do?"

"Stick as close to Jack Farrell as you can and report every man he talks to for any length of time, everything he does——"

"What?"

That word was like an explosion, and the acrobat's voice broke as he uttered it. His steady blue eyes widened, and he looked like a man who had seen a ghost or heard his doom.

"We aren't sure, but it's possible, and no man on this show is exempt from suspicion!" stated Service, and his glinting eyes fairly burned into those of the dumbfounded performer.

"You're crazy!" Wardell said excitedly. "You suspectin' Jack Farrell! I've worked for him for years, and knowed him when he wasn't a thing but a smart connection man! He's crazy over this troupe right now! It's foolish—it's loony! And I can't do it and I won't, not even for you!"

He was on his feet now, facing the three flyers with blazing eyes and set face. It was plain he had been shaken to his heels.

Groody got to his feet, and in one long step had descended three rows of seats and was beside Wardell.

"Listen," he said evenly, and in a few words outlined the reasons for suspicion of the manager. "If he's innocent, he has nothing to fear, and if he's guilty, you yourself want to know it, don't you?"

Wardell was like a man possessed. He paced up and down in the tanbark of the track, and shot troubled glances at the three airmen. Somehow Groody felt a change in the frank friendliness of the man, as though caution and suspicion had been born in his mind.

He stopped his silent pacing suddenly, and his question was serious and abrupt.

"Who mentioned Farrell, and this scheme? Musselman?" he asked.

"No!" Groody told him, and as he said it realized that Musselman had been the first man to mention the manager's name.

Wardell resumed his jerky walk, and it was plain that a battle was going on within him. Finally he stopped, and faced them.

"I'll do it, on account o' what you done for me," he said slowly, "And because Jack's got nothin' to fear. But I'll feel like a snake, and I'm thinking that maybe I'm workin'——"

He stopped, as though catching himself, and his face whitened slightly.

"Go on!" snapped Groody.

Wardell looked at him helplessly, his broad, frank face showing his misery. Then:

"That's all," he said dully. "Just what do you want me to do?"

"You live, with your wife, on the same car, and can, without suspicion, sort of watch Farrell night and day," Service said quietly, and went on to give the details of what reports they wanted.

Tom must have felt the implications in Wardell's last uncompleted sentence, Groody was thinking, and realized that the acrobat had turned from a friend into a suspicious neutral as far as the flyers were concerned. The mention of any suspicion of Farrell had brought it out, and he was going to do what they had asked merely to pay his debt to them. And Groody, mentally reviling himself in no uncertain terms, felt that from his tiff with the manager to the present moment he had been responsible for jeopardizing the success of their mission by tactlessness. And with that admission another scheme started forming in his mind. Perhaps he could wipe out some of the damage, and start a new deal.

Wardell walked away silently, his face like a thundercloud.

"One might figure that he'd go straight to Farrell and tell him all about it," Corrigan commented, "but somehow he looks to me like a real egg who'll stick with us because he thinks its his duty, regardless of how unpleasant that duty is."

"Exactly," agreed Service. "Well, I'd better be getting under way. George, you'll fix up the 'chute jump, set that trap, and outside of that watch and wait, so to speak, for Hinton, eh?"

Groody nodded.

"There's one cinch," Tom said as he got up. "If our suspicions of Farrell are correct, your bonehead play this morning'll result in a complete cessation of hostilities between Farrell and the show. And an immediate start of hostilities between Farrell and ourselves!"

CHAPTER XIII

ENEMIES

A HALF hour later Tom had departed, and Groody was stalking along the midway with his characteristic long-legged, bent kneed stride. Beside him was Corrigan. Dusk was falling, and the midway was gradually filling up. When they reached the sideshow tent they veered off to the right, ducking under ropes between sideshow and big top. They were bound for the stake and chain wagon, which was always located back of sideshow and big top. The light wagons were chugging away, supplying electricity to the show, and out back of the big top, two hundred yards away, the dappled gray baggage horses, now tentless, shone like dim silver ghosts.

Before his circus career was over Groody was to become very familiar with the "stob wagon." Its function was to carry the stakes and chains used in putting up the show. Its secondary purpose was to supply a headquarters for the bosses on the lot. A canvas canopy extended from one side of it, and underneath this shelter were pails of water and basins for washing, a keg of drinking water, and towels which were supplied by the stake and chain man. In addition there were a few chairs, some soap, a comb and brush, and other useful articles. These were supplied by the stake and chain man, and in return therefore he was the recipient of weekly tips. Surrounding it were a number of small tents, used for various purposes. The ushers dressed in one of them, another was supplied with buckets of water for bathing purposes. And at the stake and chain wagon could be found, in off hours, the boss canvasman and his assistants, the boss hostler, and, at various times, just about every boss from the manager to the adjuster.

Groody and Corrigan found a full quorum —Bronk O'Donnelly and his four assistants, old Daddy Mettal, the adjuster, Jack Farrell, and several ushers and ticket takers.

Corrigan glanced at the sky. It looked dark and lowering off to the east.

"I'd better go over and stake the ship down," he said as a strong puff of wind hit them. "Besides, it's getting dark and that ship had better be guarded, I imagine."

"O.K.," assented Groody. "I'll be over in a while. We'll have to get a second trustworthy guard from Musselman, at that. You can't be staying up all the time, and it sure seems best that I travel on the train—or one of us."

They were within a few feet of the wagon and he was conscious that every eye was on them and that conversation had stopped. As Corrigan left and he came forward, however, Minneapolis Red, the fiercely bemustached old stake and chain man, resumed what he had been saying.

"Showmen!" he snorted. "There ain't any comin' up! Whaddaye think Willie-off-the-Yacht asks for this afternoon? Talcum powder, by God!"

"Hello, flyer!" roared big O'Donnelly. "Welcome! Had a wreck this mornin', eh? Join the stob wagon gang and git to be a showman!"

Groody grinned at the big, comely Irishman. It seemed that Bronk O'Donnelly was his friend. The fight and the episode of Mame Wardell had apparently aroused sincere respect and liking in the bosom of the boss canvasman.

The flyer's eyes met the steely gaze of Farrell, and in a flash Groody decided to take the plunge at once.

"Can I see you a moment, Mr. Farrell?" he asked evenly.

As though they could feel the tension in the air, the troupers remained quiet while Farrell gazed long and steadily at the lanky flyer. Then, without a word, he arose, and walked into the dusk with Groody.

"Mr. Farrell," Groody said slowly, "you made me mad this morning, and I made assertions unwarranted by the facts. As a matter of cold fact, everyone in this show, from Musselman and yourself to the waiters in the cook tent, are under suspicion as far as we're concerned. We've got to work that way. But I want to apologize, to assure you that we're here to help the show as much as we can, and to ask your cooperation, at least, for the good of the show if for no other reason."

His object in talking as he did was two-fold: to undo, as far as possible, the damage he had done by tipping his hand to Farrell that morning; and to insinuate himself into the manager's confidence if he could. So he went on, untruthfully:

"To be truthful about the thing, there are things which have happened today which have caused us to suspect that the person responsible for the condition of the show is not yourself, but the man you'd least suspect. And Mr. Farrell, I want you to believe this. I said what I did partly because I was sore at your unwarranted insults. But the main reason was that I wanted to find out the truth quickly—and sometimes a bluffing shot in the dark works. Get me? I was on the job when I talked to you, trying to find out something.

"How about letting bygones be bygones, and helping us out? You want to solve the mysteries around this show. So do we. If you don't cooperate with us, you're working against the show. And maybe it isn't conceited to remind you that we're supposed, because of Tom Service's experience, to be specialists on this sort of stuff."

Farrell was listening quietly, his cold eyes never leaving Groody's face. The flyer was conscious of a certain uncomfortable feeling under that passionless gaze, as though the thoughts behind them were incomprehensible, and possibly menacing. There was a moment of silence, during which Groody took a long drag at his cigar, and Farrell's eyes dropped to the ground.

Suddenly the manager's body seemed to slump with utter weariness. Totally relaxed, he stared at his feet. And at that moment, despite his conviction that Farrell was the nigger in the Gavin-Garfield Circus, the airman felt an ununderstandable sympathy for the circus man. If Farrell was innocent, the man was surely going through hell, seeing his show on the road to destruction, and he himself stripped of his authority, raging helplessly under the yoke of the outsider, Musselman.

"What you might have said," Farrell said softly, "doesn't amount to a damn in my young life. Get that straight. And neither does your molasses about wanting to help this show. You're here for what money there is in it, and I know damn well that that money is entirely too much! So you take your apologies and your mealy-mouthed spouting and work 'em on somebody else, see? And I don't need anybody to tell me what to do for the good of this show!"

The flyer hesitated. Then he straightened, and his own face was like granite and his narrow eyes as cold as Farrell's own.

"All right," he said crisply. "You sure are in a hell of a sweat over this show. Trying your best to cooperate with everybody, aren't you? I'm just telling you, as a hired detective, that your helpful attitude is much appreciated, and will be rewarded, if we can arrange it! You're so damn jealous of your own little authority that you can't bear to have anybody else do anything after you've already failed, eh? That's a damn small-time attitude, Mr. Farrell!"

For a moment he thought Farrell was

about to jump on him. His body was tense, his thin lips a mere gash across his face.

"Remember what I said this morning?" the manager said softly. "Well, it still goes as it lays, and I don't cooperate with that kind—I fight 'em!"

He left without a word, and did not return to the stob wagon, but walked rapidly toward the big top. Groody stood there for a moment in the gathering darkness.

"Every son-of-a-gun on this show leads a double life," he told himself ruminatively. "Now if Farrell's the guilty man, every cent that could be spent foolishly, to help on the bankruptcy, would appeal to him. And he's all worked up about the money we're getting. Musselman himself, on that basis, could be suspected—and he joined the show late and has been damn near murdered himself. Competitors apparently out of the question.

"Nothing to do but watch and pray, and I'm not much on prayer!"

CHAPTER XIV

STORM

BACK at the stake and chain wagon he found the same group, with the exception of Farrell. The bosses were having an interval of rest between the tearing down of the horse and cook tents and the start of work on the menagerie. The animal acts were routined to make their appearances during the first half of the show, and the menagerie top was torn down while the show in the big top was in full swing.

As Groody arrived, though, Bronk O'Donnelly was surveying the eastern sky. It was black as night over there, and the wind was freshening with every moment.

"Better put up the monkey ropes, Corpy," he stated, and the other bosses got up and took a sight of the sky. Groody already knew him through O'Donnelly. Corpy was a tall, bony, genial old jungle buzzard who was at least sixty years old and was both trouper and hobo.

Corpy made off to collect a gang to put on the emergency monkey ropes—extra guys to hold the big top down in case of a storm. Groody wasted no time.

"Say, gents," he started, "I want to put up a proposition to you, before I brace Musselman. That son-of-a-gun wouldn't know what would boost business if he saw it."

He outlined his proposition to the quiet gathering. The ushers had left, as had the ticket sellers, and the flaring midway was now a mass of people. The preliminary band concert in the big top was going on, but somehow the gaiety seemed forced, to Groody. There was something tragic about band music, contrasting with the overwrought, silent showmen whom even Bronk O'Donnelly's spirits could not cheer up.

When he finished, Daddy Mettall poked his cane into the ground.

"Good!" he proclaimed. "It'll boost ticket selling in the advance offices, and people that've bought tickets'll go, rain or shine, hot or cold!"

The others grunted agreement, without particular enthusiasm. However, they looked at Groody with some curiosity. Accustomed as they were to performers whose work was thrilling and daring, the airman, nevertheless, was somewhat of a sublimated edition of daredevil to them. And Groody, sensing this, took another plunge. It was vitally important that he and Corrigan, by some means, procure the confidence, respect, and liking, if possible, of the bosses.

"I'd like to say one thing," he stated with great deliberation. "Rather, to ask something of you. I've been around this show long enough to know that you all resent Musselman, who's not a practical showman, being in charge. You don't like anything he does or anybody he hires—which includes us. Now the situation is this: we're here to help business, and also as detectives. We're not Musselman men, or anybody else's men either. We're here to nail anybody we can get with the goods on 'em. But this show'll never get a foot, fighting inside itself, so to speak. We've got some plans laid that we think'll bring some results within a week. I'm not asking you to kiss us, but I'm asking that you bosses give us cooperation, regardless of what you think of us. And I'll also say," he added after a second's pause, "that anybody that don't do that is helping to crab the show!"

For a moment he stood there, his saturnine face outlined against the darkness in the light of the one electric globe hung to the wagon. Then Bronk O'Donnelly's bull-like roar split the atmosphere.

"The boy's right!" he stated.

"Will you fellows report anything you see, give us any dope we ask for, and not work against us?" demanded Groody.

"Shore they will!" roared O'Donnelly.

Groody was aware of the fact that what he and Tom had done for Mame Wardell had helped their standing, and he did not think it necessary to press his point further.

"I'll take your silence for consent," he told them, "and now I'd like to get some dope on any men in the show—canvasmen, animal men, prop boys—who may have come under the eye as being a little out of the ordinary. Any of 'em talk in an unusual way, or seem to be amateurs at this circus game?"

"Nobody except these trick detectives!" snorted O'Donnelly. "If you ain't any more good'n they are, a dollar a day's too much for your wages, Groody! They're always snoopin' around. Yuh meet 'em pussyfootin' everywheres and somethin's always happening, and they know less about it than the boys that are in bed at the time!"

"I see. Well, let's lay some plans, eh?"

And they did. Groody suddenly had the feeling that the bosses were with him. As he outlined his ideas it was plain to any observer that he was absolutely sincere in his desire to help the show and earn his pay. There could be no doubt left in any of their minds that he was not a "Musselman man," or anything other than a conscientious operative. Bronk O'Donnely was frankly friendly, and he carried the others with him. Groody's forthright words, plus the record he had made for himself around the show, all combined to give him, with surprising abruptness, a position as one of them. Dad Mettall warmed up, and finally said:

"You know there's another angle in the hard luck we've been having. Ordinarily, on these damage suits, I can go around with a wad of money in my pocket, slip 'em a fair amount in cash, get a release, and that's that. The other way, a suit to fight, means a world of trouble and expense—and usually unfair damages. A circus trying to beat an individual case in the fellow's home town is impossible. Fair treatment is almost impossible.

"And the hell of it is that a lot of the cases on, this season, have been with men who wouldn't accept cash settlement at all. Insisted on suing, and all that. God alone knows what we're in for!

"And it looks sort of funny to me."

The huge bald-headed old man, leaning forward on his cane as he sat in a canvas chair, was very serious. And Groody promptly gave utterance to his thoughts.

"Meaning that possibly our unknown friends are smoking these damaged folks up to make as much trouble as possible?"

The adjuster nodded.

"When we get our first clue, we'll backtrack on that," stated Groody.

The heavens were darkening fast, as time for the matinée approached, and time after time individual bosses left for a few moments to make sure that all precautions against the seemingly inevitable storm had been taken. But at the end of the hour's talk Groody was certain of several things. Among them was the fact that each boss would do the job assigned him, although it meant loss of considerable sleep. Another was that he had utter confidence in the four veteran showmen whom the bosses had sent for, and who had been assigned certain definite duties to perform. One, particularly, Eddie Ramp by name, impressed Groody profoundly. Despite the fact that Ramp, sailmaker of the show, had only one leg, he was assigned a prominent part in the system of espionage which Groody was organizing.

"One last thing," Groody summed up as the first blare of the band concert reached them through the glowing sides of the swaying big top. "It'll help things a good deal, strikes me, if there's as much harmony as possible in the show. If you fellows don't get sore at Musselman, but try to hold your tempers, and remember that we're all trying to make this a season for the show instead of about two weeks more before all our jobs are gone, it'll mean a good deal. Don't forget that one thing the enemy would like more than anything else is just what's happened—internal dissension that would be enough to wreck the troupe without any outside aid at all."

For a moment Bronk O'Donnelly's face was lowering.

"Talkin' at me, huh?" he growled.

There was a moment of silence. Sudden patters of rain fell on the canvas canopy, and for a second the wind rose to almost a gale. O'Donnelly got to his feet. A wide and totally disarming Irish smile flashed across his face, and he roared:

"Right ye are, boy! I'm game. Come on, boys. This here's got the possibilities of a blowdown! And say, what a chance it'd be for funny stuff, eh?"

CHAPTER XV

STAMPEDE

AT THE opening of the night show the rain had not yet made its appearance, but the sky was black and starless, the wind was coming in strong gusts, and thunder rumbled in the distance. Groody, having strolled over to the ship, verified the fact that Corrigan was guarding it from a hiding place in the bushes, and examined the stakes. Then he went into the menagerie tent.

Surprisingly, there was a fairly generous attendance despite the weather. The showmen, however, were uneasy. All canvasmen were standing by. The bosses made the rounds restlessly, examining the extra monkey ropes and making all preparations possible for a quick getaway after the show.

Fifteen minutes after the start of the show the air suddenly became still, heavy and oppressive. Lightning split the blackness almost incessantly, and crackling thunder was closer, now. It was then that Bronk O'Donnelly gave orders to knock down the sideshow and get it loaded, sacrificing the after-show crowd and the scattering midway patronage.

Groody strolled out into the backyard, where there was always a group of performers or animals waiting to go on. The "kinkers" were glancing nervously at the sky. It wasn't merely the fact of the oncoming tempest which bothered them. That was an almost weekly occurrence. It was as though they sensed the opportunity it would give for enemies to assail the show. Even the highstrung horses were unusually fidgety and nervous, and the grooms had all they could do to hold them.

The tall flyer himself was restless and uneasy. The cats were roaring, sensing the storm, and when they were driven from cage to cage, as occasion arose to free the one exit into the arena, many of them fought back with nervous viciousness. The animal men, with long pikes, had their hands full herding them up and down the line of cages. When the time came for the female lions to go on, it was necessary to herd the polar bears into a few cages, drive the tigers on up next to them and pack them in, three to a compartment, and then drive the male lions up to clear the exit for the females. So savagely did the fighting, roaring animals resist that it took five rounds of blank cartridges, shot off under recalcitrant animal's jaws, to get them in place, and then the females were a minute late in the center ring.

Groody, standing in the opening between backyard and menagerie, heard O'Donnelly's bull-like voice behind him.

"Get Fred Mygatt!" he roared.

When the dinner-jacketed equestrian director had come out into the backyard, O'Donnelly told him tersely:

"Cut the show. She's coming. This is a tough lot even when it's dry; the runs are two miles away; and it's a long jump tonight," said O'Donnelly. "We're going to have a muddy lot, sure as shooting."

Musselman, it seemed, appeared from nowhere.

"I don't like this cutting business unless it's a necessity!" he said loudly. "This is the first decent crowd——"

"It is a necessity!" boomed O'Donnelly. "We got an eighty mile run tonight—and if this lot gets muddy we won't be off here until daylight! We got to get the people out if we can!"

Mygatt disappeared within the big top. Now the whistle shrilled more frequently. Acts were run off like lightning, their routines cut. And just as the male lions were in the arena the great top bent and swayed until the center poles quivered under the strain as a powerful gust of wind hit it.

The wind strengthened every minute as the air grew more oppressive. The band played louder, Jack Farrell was outside the marquee scanning the sky anxiously, the bosses were here, there and everywhere, while the rapt audience watched the hysterically speedy show.

Then came the storm in all its fury. Rain poured in bucketfuls, drenching the canvas in less than a minute. The thunder and lightning were terrific. The soaked laborers and bosses worked like mad as the elephant men stood by their swaying, trumpeting charges and attempted to soothe them. The boss hostler, astride his bay pony with long whip in hand, was forcing his drivers and hostlers on, the whip flick-ing out at the superb, straining grays whose task with the heavy wagons was getting more severe every moment. High on the seats of menagerie pole wagons and canvas wagons hunched the drivers and brakemen. The drivers, wizened old horsemen handling eight horse teams with the skill of forty years' practice, shouted encouragement to their animals above the roar of the storm and swung them, as though by magic, in and out of a mass of obstacles which would have taxed the skill of an ordinary driver with but two horses.

GROODY, wet to the skin, occasionally peeked into the big top, but most of his attention was concentrated on the backyard and the elephants. Those mammoths were getting very uneasy, swaying at their stakes. The runts, small, young elephants at one end of the line, were trumpeting lustily. The boss elephant man took big Tess up and down the line to encourage the herd, but even Tess was none too placid. Groody could think of but one thing in that bedlam of shouts and curses and roars, split by the thunderous artillery from above.

"What a chance for something to happen!"

The audience was getting restless, now, too, although they knew nothing of the mad activity outside the tent. The lot was stripped, save for the big top and the dozens of wagons. Even the smallest donica tent was down, and loaded. The great searchlights from the electric light wagons shone through the terrific downpour on a lot that was a sea of mud. And always the wind grew stronger, the lightning nearer.

Groody was peeking in the back door as he noted that several dozen people, alarmed at the swaying center poles, had started to leave. Suddenly the announcer's whistle shrilled. Groody was standing beside the cursing O'Donnelly. George Byers lifted his hand for silence.

"Before announcing one of our star attractions!" he shouted slowly, "Let me assure you that there is no danger. Stay, and the shower will pass over. Now, ladees and gentlemen——"

He was forced to stop as the storm seemed to reach its apex. The howl of the wind was the shriek of aerial demons, and every pole in the top quivered and the sidewalls seemed about to blow in. The battering of the rain increased, and the top billowed like a wind-swept sea.

For a second it died. Then a voice, loud and deep, coming from somewhere on the other side of the tent, rang through the tense, rustling quiet.

"Run for it—she's coming down!"

Not three seconds later the band was drowning Bronk O'Donnelly's blasphemy as he ran, shouting down the track. But nothing could stop the panic-stricken crowd now.

In wave after wave of hysterical humanity they poured off the plank seats. In a second the tracks and rings were a surging sea of fighting humanity. Actors, managers, bosses, canvasmen, all dashed to the rescue. Fighting back the crowd, begging, pleading, thev fairly prayed to them to make an orderly exit.

But there was no stopping them. With that thunder above and the wind making the unknown's prediction seem inevitable, they fought and trampled one another in their mad hysteria. And Groody, his brain like ice within him, watched the shambles briefly and thought:

"She may come down, at that!"

It was a veritable cyclone, now, and truly the center poles were bending under the strain. Suddenly something snapped with a loud report. One pole had gone.

Groody was running for the animals. Always there had been in the back of his mind the belief that if the opportunity given by a storm should be grasped by their enemies, the animals would be most likely to provide the point of attack. They represented a small fortune each, and incalculable potentialities for trouble.

As he reached the line of elephants and the tiger cages he heard a series of terrific crashes from within the tent. The plank seats were being torn down by the people who were struggling to get down from the top rows. Some of them would fall ten feet to the ground, and even the hardboiled flyer's face blanched as he envisioned the consequences.

A wave of fighting, bloody, disheveled people surged through the sidewalls of the big top, and gave a glimpse of the mob, half on the ground, within. Shouts and shrieks rent the air, and the wind and the rain and the thunder bellowed over all.

It was too much for the runts. One after another, trumpeting their fear, they pulled their stakes and ran for big Tess, at the other end of the line. The red-coated elephant men were after them, clinging to their ears, fighting them with bullhooks, to no avail. The full grown members of the herd were wild-eyed and were trumpeting loudly, trunks curled high in the air.

As Groody reached the vicinity of big Tess, where the keepers were struggling desperately to keep their charges in line, a tidal wave of spectators flowed through the tent toward them.

Now the cursing keepers had to fight off the mob, striving to keep them away from the elephants; but the pressure from behind seemed too much. The mob spread like poured water over the ground, but the first charge from the maelstrom of humanity, which was the big top, threw the emerging crowd of men and women fairly against the herd.

GROODY, towering above the crowd, was within a few feet of Tess. He had forgotten everything, now, except that he must do all in his power to stave off disaster. It might have been his own show which was being torn to pieces before his eyes. Those elephants must not go on the rampage!

And he saw it. Saw it with his own eyes, while the elephant men, backs to their animals, were hurling the mob back. A hand raised before Tess's very eyes, and opened. A small object shot into the air. And Tess, with a mad bellow of crazed terror, shrank back. The stake came from the ground. She whirled away from the crowd, as Groody hurled himself toward her. He tried to shout a warning, but his voice could not be heard above the din. A tremendous clap of thunder, a temporary heightening of the force of the storm, and Tess, trumpeting to her followers, was off.

For the first time in his life the lanky flyer was in a daze. It seemed to him that it was all a farcical nightmare. He scarcely knew what he was doing, or why he did it. His mind was numb with the significance of what he had seen, blazing with hatred of one man, and aware, at the same time, of savage self-contempt for himself and sympathy so profound for another that life itself seemed but a small recompense to make at the time.

His lean body fairly shot through the air, and he was swinging on the gigantic ear of Tess. Followed by the whole herd, the old giantess charged through the night, Groody, legs hunched up, merely hung there and fought her and shouted reassurance into her ear.

But Tess was beyond the influence of any representative of the human race which, ordinarily, she trusted so completely and obeyed so docilely. On she went, rushing blindly through the rain-swept night. And behind her came her herd.

Dim shouts from behind, and then they were out of range of the lights. A terrific blow smote Groody's legs. Tess had torn her way through a line of parked automobiles, and behind her came the crashing and grinding of metal and wood as her followers ran across it. Now they were in the open fields, and Groody was still fighting to stop her.

He was scarcely aware of the perils of his position. Should he drop off he would inevitably be crushed beneath the feet of the oncoming herd; that he knew. He must hang on, now. But Tess, charging ahead in a panic, would not so much as swerve for any obstacle. Dashed against a tree or the side of a house; lifted by her own trunk and smashed to the ground—any one of a dozen ways of getting killed—were probabilities.

But he must hang on, and hang on he did. He tried to scramble to her back, but could not. At times his feet were within inches of the elephant's, as he swung like a pendulum on that huge ear.

Then, abruptly, he came to himself. Came to himself so far as to soliloquize:

"If this isn't the damnedest ride I ever had, I'm dreaming. I can't stop this baby. How the hell do I get off?"

Tess was now running uphill, through thin woods. Groody couldn't be sure, but he thought he heard wild screams from the rear of the rushing procession. The rain was slackening, now, as the storm moved on. The lightning was in the distance, the thunder coming after a perceptible interval. It was still dark as pitch. His arms were almost torn from their sockets, and the strain of keeping his body hunched up into a ball was so great that he knew he could keep it up no longer. If he let his feet drag, a broken leg or a crushed foot was inevitable.

Tess decided for him. There came a sudden shock as her mighty forehead hit the side of what seemed to be a small shack. She had hit the corner, and the luck of a flyer was with Groody. The ear to which he hung was on the outside, and he was not crushed against the building. The sudden stoppage loosened his hold, and he was thrown fifteen feet away while Tess and her herd tore through the frail shed and disappeared into the night.

Half stunned, Groody lay there in the now gentle rain, and watched the shadowy bulks rush past. Then his faculties snapped into normal. Wild screeching resounded through the darkness, and shots.

Before he could move, it had passed. A man, riding a white horse, gun in hand, close behind the last of the runts. Yelling with bloodcurdling effect, occasionally beating the last of the runts, shooting in the air—he was doing everything in his power *to keep the stampede going!*

Now Groody was tearing down the slope toward the blotch of dim light which he was sure marked the show, a mile and a half away. The rain stopped, the quick gale had passed, and a few stars peeped forth. Then, to Groody's vast delight, the moon. Now he could run, and run he did. Long legs covering the ground with gigantic strides, hawklike face grim and cruel, he tore for the circus.

A half mile from it he met a group of men on horseback, with flashlights. Some of the elephant men of the show, and as he stopped in the night, Reeves, gray-headed boss, was off his horse in a second.

"Seen you hangin' t' Tess. Where are they?"

Groody gulped his news, without mentioning the name of the man he had seen start the stampede back in the menagerie tent.

"A few miles ahead of you now—but try to get that rider! If I can get off the ground, I'll spot 'em for you! You can follow the trail, of course. But if you see me circling in the air make a beeline for where I am," he told them, and was off.

There was some hope of his taking off, because the field sloped rather steeply, and might drain exceptionally well.

FOR the moment, as he tore through the moonlight, he felt that the capture of that whooping rider was the most important thing in the world. What he had seen, back at the show, with his own eyes, he was sure of; but it was rather slim evidence, under the conditions, to submit to a court. And that man would keep his mouth shut, too. A complete confession would be impossible to secure from him. That rider, though, a hired plug ugly, could be made to talk.

Corrigan was at the ship. Down on the lot hundreds of shadowy figures were toiling mightily. Yells and shouts split the air, and a fringe of hundreds of spectators ringed the scene of Gargantuan industry, lit wanly by the searchlights of the light wagons. The panic was over, but the big top was not down yet.

Nor would it be, for many hours, according to Corrigan. Groody wasted no time.

"Let's see about a take-off," he gasped briefly. "Come on."

As they walked rapidly over the field Groody told his story.

"It knocks me dead, at that. Your scheme seems the right one, though," Corrigan said.

A moment later, Groody was in the front cockpit and Corrigan at the prop.

Three times Corrigan swung the big stick, and on the third try the wet motor caught. Groody, bent over his instruments, did not see a stocky figure approaching the ship.

It was Ed Wardell, and as he came up to the ship Groody quieted the engine.

"Well?" he barked.

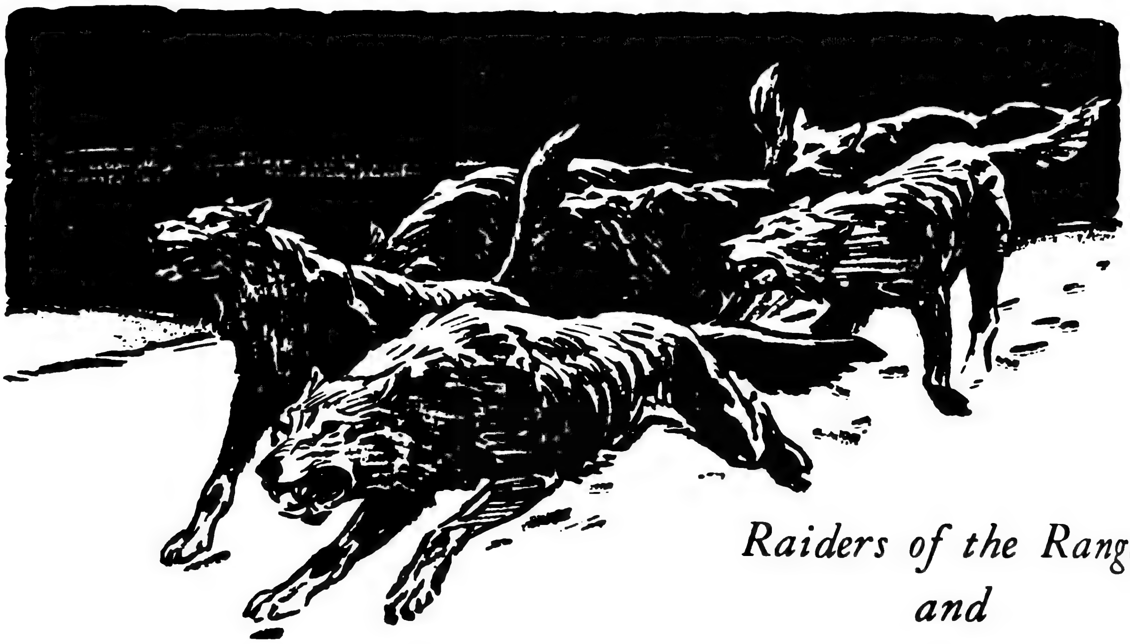
The famous acrobat's face seemed drawn and strained, his eyes miserable.

"I said I'd do it and I will," he said doggedly. "But it don't mean nothin'! Jack Farrell just licked one o' these detectives until he couldn't stand up. And he's ordered all three of 'em off the show!"

"Showdown!" said Groody. "It's breaking at last!"

The motor roared exultantly as he advanced the throttle.

Who was the man who started that disastrous stampede? In the next instalment Groody reveals his name, and the terrible wrath of the troupers cries out for vengeance.



Raiders of the Range and GUARDIANS *of the* SHEEP

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

THE Starling Sheepfold main outfit was in the heart of the One Way Cañon country, so named from a slash in the broken mountain land, which, though rough and steep, was the only feasible direction for those unfortunate enough to head into it. There were two Starling brothers. One a tall, expressionless man,, Dock. The other, Jerry, was a short, square-shouldered, barrel of a man. His face also unvarying in its emotionlessness.

The Starlings had as boys been tenders of sheep bands. They had gone out, when fourteen and sixteen years old respectively, into the back country, each with his flock. There, in the employ of Jake Holman, they had come into man's estate. They learned to know their flocks, their dogs, and the stalwart strength of those who win their livelihood from all growing things. Something else they learned too: the grim arts of aggression and defense.

In the seven years that followed the One Way Cañon country added nothing to the annals of the sheep and cattle wars. That was because there were only sheep oufit survivors to relate the details, and such men are not talkers. The two Starling boys went through the war, the rifling of their .38-55's wearing down a good deal, the polish wearing off their rifle woodwork, where their hands held it, their empty shells lying about in more or less profusion at those rocks and fallen timbers where they stood siege. Their employer, Jake Holman, used to bring out extra boxes of cartridges when he brought in their grub, knowing the boys liked to keep in practice, shooting wolves and grizzlies, cougars and cowboys with equal facility.

The secret of the constant success of the Starling boys had been their dogs. They spent their idle hours teaching the sheep dogs tricks of herding. The humans discerned needs and devised methods, and these they passed on to the dogs, with the result that while the boys fought the raiding cowboys, the dogs caught the sheep flocks and rushed them to cover in hollows, which compelled the raiders to drive up hill or down among rough boulders. This in itself was sufficient to break legs and disconcert cattlemen unfamiliar with skilled sheep handling. .

Jake Holman was killed as he came up to feed his shepherds when the McKintry outfit caught him out by the First Water. Jake was a mystery man, reticent, untracable and without heirs or successors to claim his sheep fold and his sheep bands. When food didn't come, one of the Starlings headed down to find out why, and found the answer in a dead body.

He returned to talk it over with his brother. The two also found a local ranch deserted. The cattlemen had at last been run out. The boys turned the cow outfit into a sheepfold. They were twenty-one and twenty-three years of age, now, quiet, watchful, competent. They lambed their bands and grazed them as usual. They carried out mutton and they shipped—in their own names. They wintered down the One Way and in the spring clipped and sold the wool. Had courts intervened they could have given accountings, to the penny, and they ran their business steadily on this impersonal basis. They added flocks and began to hire men. They made great fortunes. And always they had ransacked the world for dogs to train for sheep.

Impatiently they had rid the One Way Cañon country of gray wolves, and swept the land to destroy the coyotes. Cougars vanished and grizzlies retreated to the remotest fastnesses of the alpine heights above the timber lines. Sheep—just sheep—dominated the land.

They discovered German sheep dogs, sharp-nosed, grayish-brownish-black, with the most alert ears in the world, and great eyes so full of expression as to belittle the claims of French poodles as the summit of canine intelligence. The Starlings personally took over the training of their nine German sheep dogs, direct from the Black Forest.

A strange pack, those dogs. They looked at a little distance, like dark skinned coyotes, or even melanistic gray wolves. The Starlings had never seen sheep dogs of that wild aspect, that savage ferocity—nor yet of such sharp, clean cut herding efficiency as they worked, alone, in pairs or in a pack at round-up or clipping time.

Those sheep dogs, even to the six months' old pups, knew within a few days every sheep in a band of twelve hundred. Perhaps each band has its own particular odor. Who can tell? Anyhow, let a wayward wether go mingling among an adjacent flock, and the German sheep dog in charge of either band would presently come charging indignantly in and roust out the intruder.

HAVING so many great bands, the Starling brothers kept the new dogs at the main outfit that first summer. The animals were not regularly employed, except as the owners worked them experimentally a few hours a day or sent them after the small flocks which were behind the outfit fences in the alfalfa. There were some blooded rams which needed acclimatization. There were a lot of yearlings, and there were some fattening stock for special mutton. Taking these, the German sheep dogs were put through fancy paces—and the rest of the time, night and day, they loafed around the outfit with their lean jaws on their forepaws, and their eyes half closed, engaging in those thoughts a dog has in idle hours.

The Starlings rather regretted that they had so thoroughly cleaned their sheep country of carnivorous raiders, especially of cougars and lobo wolves. They would have liked to watch the German sheep dogs handling a cougar raider of a sheep band, or meeting the menace of a lobo wolf pack. Certainly, when a casual coyote which had escaped their poisons and their steel trap jaws came down around a sheep band within reach of the imported dogs, the Germans acted according to the best traditions of the collie and considerable more.

And then over from the west pasture a sheep tender reported that three nights before a pack of wolves had swept into his flock and torn twenty-one sheep to pieces, cutting their throats and stripping their wool, eating a mess of mutton but wantonly killing nearly a score.

Wolves, eh? The two Starlings rode over with all their German sheep dogs from the Black Forest and tried to pick up the tracks of the wandering killer grays, but nearly five days had elapsed, and of course the beasts had by that time swept on their way. Apparently the wolf pack were travelers, coming down across country from a crowded or a dangerous range to look for new hunting land.

These traveler bands sometimes do not return. Sometimes they come back and presently establish themselves in some five or twenty-five thousand square miles of country. In about three weeks the raiders hit again.

The Ringold sheep outfit over east of the Starlings had a band attacked on the Divide Ridge, and not only were thirty-two sheep killed, but one of the two sheep dogs, a Scotch collie, was so badly torn that it died in the morning. The Starlings knew then that the raider pack had probably begun to make a circuit of the One Way Cañon country, and they sent word around to all their own shepherds to be on the watch and guard. Rifles which had grown rusty and others which had been put away, caked in tallow, were brought out and cleaned for business.

The sheep men were not particularly given to rough sports, but the thought of gray wolves matched against their particular pets stirred their feelings as nothing had done since those boyhood days when, to protect their precious bands, they had faced odds of two to one on occasion. They hated loboes and they knew they would lose more sheep, but they did not put out steel traps or make up poison pills for the peculiarly adept methods of sheep men wolf extermination. They put off the sure ways in hopes of giving their German sheep dogs a whack at the raiders.

They knew what this was apt to do. It likely would cost a lot of money, for when a wolf band begins to kill sheep for fun they make their visits expensive.

The choice band of sheep on the north ridges was attacked one morning about two o'clock. There was no warning. The pack did not come howling along in famine need, their baying echoing like that of a pack of dogs chasing a deer. Instead, the first the sleeping sheep tender knew of the visit was when he heard the sheep starting up, their hoofs scratching the gravel of the night bed. The dog watching the sheep was caught by surprise, too, not hearing the approach.

The onslaught was terrific, the dark shadows of the killers leaping hither and yon through the gray flock. As the band scattered, the fangs of the ravening beasts tore the throats of the sheep and left the ground dotted with the red-stained lifeless woollies. The killing was of forty-two sheep. Always the pack killed a few more than the last time. And then when three of them had torn the frantically courageous sheep dog to pieces, the raiders scattered in all directions and raced away like black wraiths under the starlight.

THE wolves hated sheep, apparently. Away out and up in the scattering timber the two sheep owners found where the pack had trailed and pulled down a mule deer to eat it. The beasts also left their trail over the High Divide, crossing in a snow which had fallen down to the 7,800 foot elevation. But it was not possible to track the pack to its lairs, wherever they were. The beasts scattered after a raid and probably went to sleep in individual hiding places until some other day when, hungry and bloodthirsty again, they joined up for a savage attack.

Now these raiders were unreadable in their circuits and their habits. But generally they came through on Monday nights. This was more significant than anyone divined, because it was on Mondays that the ranchers of the folds were away down into the trading center of the country, at Bear Valley, gossiping with one another and buying supplies. This was incredible intelligence on the part of the wolves, but there was the evidence—five raids straight on Monday nights.

When more than a hundred head of sheep had been destroyed for the Starling sheep men, they saw that luck was against their hope of bringing the German sheep dogs in a meeting against the raiders. Their sporting blood had been stirred by the thought of the fight which would then ensue.

The two did not cease their efforts to put their dog pack out where they hoped the wolves would strike, but no matter where they posted the dogs, the raid would come fifteen or twenty miles away across the basin or out on the distant hills.

To poison beasts which invariably attack living prey is hardly feasible. The Starlings realized the difficulties in this line, but they made up capsules of both strychnine and cyanide and carried the capsules, ready for business should they ever find a place to put the poison out. They also rode wide with their steel traps, and because they wanted the German sheep dogs to know them, were at pains to teach them the pain in the traps and to show them the various tricks of blind sets, asafetida medicine, water crossing pansets, and all the other kinds of trap business. Every one of the dogs displayed the liveliest interest in these proceedings, coming up to the sets and smelling them, and circling around as though to learn the lie of the land.

If the dogs should ever be chasing the raiders, knowing where the traps were, they would not themselves pinch their toes. And the dogs displayed their intelligence by jumping a coyote one day and, heading it, drove the skulker straight through a brook crossing spread of No. 5's; and, sure enough, the beast was caught. Then the dogs came with wagging tails and wide, grinning mouths to bring the sheep brothers over to see what they had done.

This was hopeful. The Starlings were delighted. They killed a deer for the German dogs and gave them a feast. The dogs ate with obvious understanding of their reward, and if the raiders had not, about five days later, cut through a band of twelve hundred sheep, killing a hundred and eighteen by actual count, it may be the Starlings would have delayed putting into practice the knowledge of one odd weakness which they now discovered in the band, whose destructiveness had attained a loss of about $4,000 and a percentage of the "natural losses" amounting to nearly 20%.

Dock Starling found a deer which had been killed about twelve miles from the main sheepfold. The deer was a big buck, and had been quite half eaten. Passing that way three days later he was astonished to find that the big pawed beasts had come back and eaten the rest of their kill. He had never known gray wolves to do a thing like that before, especially beasts in their prime. These loboes were an anomaly, too, for they were killing sheep. Gray wolves generally kill calves and colts, but detest sheep, keeping away from them. Sometimes an old, starving wolf, driven to extremities, would eat even sheep, like a cowboy hungry and crossing sheep country, obliged to stop at a sheep camp. But it was an extremity.

The Starlings considered the fact they had discovered and began to ride for business. They took their German sheep dogs over to the northwestern grazing knolls and left them with a band of sheep which had been cut up three times, reduced to less than eight hundred head by the raiders, whose wanton killing increased with every week.

Those who would outwit wolves must note even the phase of the moon, the direction of the wind, the lie of the land of each raid scene, the peculiarities of attack —whether throat or sides or flanks, whether leaping from behind on the back, running alongside, or heading and attacking from the front. The Starlings had just one significant fact to go by, and that was the return to a carcass the raiders had themselves killed. And after a week of wide riding, Dock found what he sought.

A VERY few elk remained in the One Way Cañon country, and he discovered a cow elk which had been killed as she climbed to look for a place to drop her calf. She had gone lumbering through the junipers trying to escape the killer band, and she had been hamstrung and pulled down from behind, her flanks torn to pieces. Then came a throat attack with sharp, terrific slashes, apparently by one set of fangs after another, the beasts running underneath and snapping up.

There was the carcass, only a little more than a third devoured. Dock studied the place with his binoculars, and then, taking chunks of deer tallow from a pair of saddles he was carrying in for vension dinners, he tucked into each one a capsule of cyanide or of strychnine—enough to kill a big wolf, but not too much. Enough is enough, if one knows the poison tricks.

Then he cut out pieces of the deer hide, and tied them flesh side out over his laced boots. Without touching anything with his hands, not even the capsules or the chunks of deer tallow, he tossed over into the scene of the last struggle of the cow elk those bits of deadly bait. Luckily, there was a ledge of rimrock ten feet high along there, and the poison pills fell at the elk only when he threw them from the end of a sharpened stick, thirty or so yards distant.

This done, he backed away and rode around to where he met his brother who had found no poison place as yet. The two circled over to the cut-up flock, and found the shepherd angry because his own Scotch collie had been attacked by two of the German sheep dogs and badly cut up before the tender could rescue his pet.

"Eet's bad 'nough," the tender declared, "when wolf he kill two of my dogs, to have shee-ep dog come an' fight my latest dog, creeplin' heem, too!"

"We should have given you one of the German dogs, Bob," the Starlings declared, but the sheep tender was prejudiced now against them.

"No," he said, "they be too smart!"

"They'd outsmart the wolves, then!" Dock suggested.

"Yeh—mebby! Mebby he outsmart me, too—nah!"

"Well, here's hoping they outsmart the wolves—which are the smartest of all!"

"That ees so," the sheep tender nodded, "I forgeeve heem ef he do dat!"

One of the German dogs was heavy, now, and she had to stay at the main fold after this visit. She regarded her thick brass-studded collar and stout chain with extreme disgust. The other dogs brought her chunks of meat and one or another would lie near by, commiserating with her because of the necessary but unhappy captivity.

Wonderful beasts, those German sheep dogs! They had cost nine hundred dollars to buy and nearly as much to bring from the Black Forest to the One Way Cañon country. They posed with heads up and plumes dragging, beautiful in their suggestion of intelligent alertness and understanding. The eight free dogs would come down to lie about the kennel where the splendid female waited her litter of pups, and it was apparent that she was something more than one of the band. She was their leader. Sometimes she crinkled her nose in a smile, and the rest of them, male and female, grinned. At her muffled growl and her lifting lips, however, every one, though he be rods beyond the length of her hated chain, would shrink and slink in dismayed dread. The chain had caught the old girl unexpectedly. She shook her links restlessly, and at night the sound of her straining at the leash was audible at intervals. But sheep men know how to buy chains and put on dog collars so they stay.

One morning the eight free dogs were all gone. The leader female was sitting on her haunches with her throat and jaws pointed straight up, howling. She wailed mournfully and in such a different tone as to startle the sheep outfit, who had never heard the like, though familiar with dogs which bay at the moon and whimper at the passing by of strange and inexplicable things in the night.

Her name was Leath. When she began to howl after midnight angry shouts had silenced her for a time, and now as the men gazed at her she raised her voice in quavering anguish, bitter and protesting. The sheep men, who have always had unusual opportunities for seeing and interpreting strange incidents, now puzzled at the dog's terrific misery of soul. They couldn't figure it out at all.

They were interested in the dog, but as this was marketing day, they headed to do their Monday shopping, talking the matter over as they drove to town. They found that the raiders had attacked two bands over from their own, and everybody was talking about the raids, whose costliness could not well be borne much longer.

The Starlings brought in their supplies, and they found the old girl, Leath, still calling into the skies of the night—and still alone. That was curious. The German sheep dogs were home-bodies, if ever dogs were. They knew their own place, and they remained where they were put. They would stay with a band of sheep, watch a wagon or patrol the lines of a house grounds. And now eight of the dogs had taken to their heels, vanishing.

"Do you reckon, Jerry, they might have heard the wolves passing by?" Dock asked his brother, in the soft voice of the sheep folks.

"We better ride around a bit, and see'f we can learn," the other replied. So they saddled their horses and went circling.

ABOUT four miles out they came to a sand washout of a draw. Here they counted the tracks of eight sets of paws stringing across. That looked promising. Those dogs knew where they were going. They had a premonition apparently. But beyond, the animals had spread out; and circling, the trackers could not find which way they had traveled. Nor as they rode could the brothers find another sign of the animals.

"If they found the raiders, they'd chase—stick to them!" Dock remarked. "They're good trackers. But the wolves'd lead them a long way. It might be three days a-racing."

"And three days a-fighting, too," Jerry

remarked. "Lobo against sheep dog. That's a big band of outlaws. Wolves are heavy, you know—they run well above a hundred, often. Big and heavy; hard fighters."

"It'd be to death. I'm backing the dogs, though!"

"I am, too," the other nodded, "but we'll have to carry some in. And all'd need sewing up, course."

"Course," the other gravely nodded.

They spent that night with a band tender. The next night they were circling and stopped in an outlying cabin. No shepherd they met had heard or seen the dogs. They were glad, too, to find no sign of the wolves, no evidences of a raid, except where two deer had been killed and bones scattered some time since.

They came back straight to the main fold. This led them up the slope of the low rimrocks, and the two rode over to the edge of the ledge of stone to where they could look down on the place where the cow elk had been killed.

"We got them!" Dock exclaimed. "See that—two!"

"Three-four—" Jerry added. "And over there——"

They spurred their horses and rode around, down to the gravel slope and along to a fifth victim of the poison. There the beast was stretched on the ground, a strychnine dead, rumpled of hair, dusty of pelt, a savage meat-eater even in death; wolflike, too, but no gray wolf.

It was Dutchy, a big German sheep dog guarder. And the next one was Piute; another, Gabriel; a third, Lightfoot; a fourth, Slink. The two sheep men dragged the carcasses into a heap. Those the cyanide had hit had collapsed as though shot in the spine or brain. The others were twisted by their convulsed pairs of muscles.

Neither brother said a word. Now and again they rolled their eyes, but they were taciturn. They worked without making any remarks, inspired by a common purpose. They dumped their outlaw German sheep dogs into a wash hole, and pulled down a ton of gravel on them. They buried the carcasses deep, and with them interred the remains of the cow elk and all the pills the beasts had not picked up. They found, however, only seven dogs. One was tied up waiting for her pups. The other was a mystery, until on their way in they found Grizzly with a hunk of elk from the shoulder gripped in his jaws. He had wrenched this piece loose and was going back to the sheepfold. The brothers knew he was going to the old girl at the kennel. He had paused only to grab up a chunk of suet—and this his running had left lying little digested in his stomach. But after five or six miles the cyanide had been freed from the gelatine capsule and he had been stricken in mid-air, come down, scrambled about two or three times, and then collapsed, the evidence of his faithfulness to the leader still in his jaws.

The old girl was still howling. She had had spells of sleep coupled now and then with a wail in the air. When the two sheep men rode in and dismounted, standing beside their horses, staring at her, she lifted her lips uncertainly, half grin, half defiance. She saw in their eyes what the faces of the two men did not in the least show—their knowledge of what had been a sheep killer dog pack secret.

Her uncertain grin faded. Her defiance increased. She crouched there, her lips drawn back, showing her teeth—white, young, five years of age! She was a wonderful beast. Her pups would be perhaps even greater in their intelligence—and depravity—than she was. It would be a fifty-fifty chance, which of her pups would go straight and which go wrong.

Dock threw her the chunk of elk meat which Grizzly had held in his jaws till the cyanide slacked his muscles. She turned, curiously, to sniff at it. Then she went close and smelled with care. She turned, her eyelids lowering and her neck dropping, the hump of the far away Black Forest black wolf in her pose. Feral, the message of her mate received, she growled, wild and snarling, bitter. That was her answer to the question of the sheep men.

She knew guns, and when the two carbines leveled at her she flung herself to the full length of her chain at them, into the sights of the men who had not, as boys or men, missed their aim. She collapsed, growling.

The two men shoved another cartridge into the receivers of their two rifles, in the unconscious habitual manner of men who live with firearms.

"Too bad!" Jerry sighed, shaking his head.

"Yes," Dock nodded, "that's so!"

Everybody's Meeting PLACE

Where writers, readers and the editor gather for informal discussion

WINDMILLS AND RUSTY LANCES

THERE are a curious lot of cranks in the world. And EVERYBODY'S, with the fine traditions that are behind it, is sometimes the object of their eccentric and frequently entertaining zeal. Most of the sincere movements for the betterment of the Nation have wise and capable men guiding them; and whatever your opinion of prohibition or anti-prohibition, evolution or fundamentalism, you can still feel some respect for the ability of these contending leaders, if for nothing more.

The voluntary messiahs are quite something else again. Nothing daunts them, neither the enormous indifference of the world nor the startled laughter of a diversion seeking populace. They write interminable letters, they publish labored pamphlets which have been poorly proofread, they court with ardor the interest of anyone at all who will listen. They have, each of them, a Message and a Purpose, and they are valiant knights to the rescue of a tottering, decadent world.

Being in a position to study them, they have interested me. But the attitude of purely scientific study, I will admit, is sadly lacking. I am moved to wonder too often, while seeing them out saving the world so lustily, just how their families are getting along.

AN OLD-TIMER'S STORY

IN THE last issue there appeared a protest against the conventionalized Western story. It was by a reader who spoke with the authority of an old-timer who had seen the West in its roaring days. I wrote to him, and he replied with this most interesting letter. And it is a letter not only interesting, but as moving as any Western story I ever read. Here it is:

> I put in two hours writing you a letter and was not through and put it on the parlor table until I could finish it and when I came down this morning it was gone, and when I asked my wife where it was she said she had used it to start the fire in the grate because there were swear words in it and I could be arrested if I put them in a letter. I have been married forty years and did not say anything. I was as mad as the man said he was when he started to dig out a rabbit and struck a skunk. But that is not what I wanted to say about the field for Western stories—it's this. The early silver

mining camp was where the true romance of the West was. I don't mean the gun plays and dance hall fights but the loves and hates, the joy and sadness and gladness, the hopes and fears, hardships and sudden wealth and all that went to make the daily life of the men and women of those days something of interest, not only to them but to others.

Bret Harte got some of it and his short story *The Luck of Roaring Camp* made him famous and if he had stayed in this country instead of going to England where he died of snakes because the English people could not see he was an author, this country would have had some Westerns to be proud of.

Regarding the mining camps, I can tell you things that will make you laugh and things that will make you cry, for I was, for a good many years, where I met and saw, every day, men and women from every walk of life. I knew the men worth millions and the common miner. I went to the homes of the so-called society leaders and sometimes I had to take women from the resorts to jail.

If I could write on a typewriter with two fingers without hitting all the damn letters at once I think I could send you something to give you an idea of what I am trying to say. Some of them would make you mad enough to fight, and some would make you feel so good you would want to join a church.

Perhaps I am wrong but it seems to me cowboy stuff is worked to death. Of course, you know, and I do not, what people want. But I do know that could you vision the things I have seen, and write them out, Bill Nye's ghost would come back to see what was going on, and Bret Harte's would take another drink.

Men in rags one day, and the next, shipping thousands of dollars' worth of ore.

Women that never had but one calico dress at a time in their lives, buying sealskin coats and Paris hats.

But I will tell you one, while my finger is working good, and then quit. I was sheriff, and one Christmas eve a man got drunk and stuck a knife in another. I got him and locked him in a room and went after my rig to take him to the county seat.

The man at the barn asked me what was to be done with the man's children. He said there were three of them and they lived in a cabin at the lower end of town. I went down to see them. There was a girl about ten or twelve, a boy of eight and a little tot of a girl five or six. The mother was dead.

When I went in, of course I wanted to be cheerful so I said Merry Christmas to all of them. I sat down and began to talk to the older girl. The other two were holding hands and whispering. Pretty soon they came to me and the little girl said, "Please, mister, what is Merry Christmas?" Good God Almighty, Mr. Corcoran, can you see that, can you shut your eyes and see that little tot of a girl standing there asking me what Merry Christmas was! It was thirty years ago and I suppose I am a sentimental old fool, but a lump comes in my throat now as it did then. I could not talk and got up and went to look for the town marshal.

There was a church within two blocks where they were fixing a Christmas tree. On my way uptown I met a woman named Josie Woods. She was a notorious character. She asked me what was going to be done with the children and I told her what the little girl had asked me.

I could not find the marshal so I finally found the county judge and took him down to the cabin. I had been gone about two hours. We went to the cabin and there was Josie Woods and three other girls from the resorts. They had shut up their house, bought a lot of candles, fruit, candy and toys. Josie was putting up some spruce branches, one of the girls was popping corn, one was showing the boy a picture book, and the other was rocking the little girl in her lap. That's all.

I have been writing this out in the garage so as not to be bothered but they will be after the car soon and I must stop.

Maybe I am out of date and this stuff would be of no interest to people and I have taken up your time for nothing and am like the cat's tail, on the wrong end of the critter to know anything, if you think so, please forget it.

H. A. Wells,
Denver, Colorado.

PRESERVERS OF PEACE

LAST April the magazine had for cover design a very fine portrait of an old time Western sheriff. The painting was by Dominic Cammeroto. Most of us take these covers for granted, but Raymond S. Spears has something to say about that portrait, and it is worth passing on. He remarks in part:

> The Old Boy on the April cover looks good and just according. He'd look around just thataway, before going inside. I spent a day—I may have written you—with such a man, whose eyes watched my hand, just from force of habit, every time it dropped below my waist. Such a look was in his eyes as my father tells about when he asked an Indian Territory deputy U. S. marshal if he carried a gun—knew he did, of course, but wanted to see the man's expression. He saw it—over the top of a short gun, the stern habit of readiness accompanying the draw, his eyes hard, and then changing into a twinkle. Years on years of habitual alertness in grim expectancy is hard to overcome, and when I presently reminded the old former sheriff of his unconscious, or rather subconscious suspicion of me, he wrinkled all up in bashful confusion. And laughed, too; for I don't think he had any idea he was that watchful.

A FISH YARN

IF YOU have ever sought earnestly to lure trout or bass or perch or muskalonge from waters where such have long since ceased to lurk, *The Come-On Muskie*, in this issue, will give you a deep and appreciative chuckle. The author, **Arthur R. Otis**, knows his fish. He says of himself:

> At thirty-four I find myself a pioneer and the mayor of Sugar Lake. The population consists of three hundred coyotes, ninety-nine deer, a half dozen moose, a couple of black bears and thirty industrious settlers who obdurately refuse to vote Democratic.
>
> Fifteen years ago my mother and I parachuted into the Minnesota backwoods from a broken buckboard and I have been looping the loop with a brush hook ever since. Our farming proved largely experimental, and as the State has its own, I abandoned my stumpy acres for the more congenial enlightenment of the tourist.
>
> I became thoroughly wedded to the country when I married a local girl. Was married on crutches and am still lame. Right after the nuptials my wife went one way and I went the other! She carried a lunch pail two miles to country school and I lugged mine down into a pulpwood swamp. Together we managed to build the nucleus of Otis Lodge. And our son Bobby—well, you'll see him alongside of a giant wall-eyed on our pamphlets.
>
> I first started writing stories with a stick in the snow while cutting pulpwood. And one of my masterpieces was ruined by a falling spruce.
>
> To conclude: my father was one of the pioneer Minnesota Democrats and my mother was the first woman in the state after Volsteadism to refuse to make a fruit cake without the where-will-you-get-it?
>
> I have relatives by the same name either in St. Paul, Minnesota or Timbuktu, I forget which. And I am ambitious of two things: I want to fly a plane, and some day—well, I hope you'll see it run even to the tenth edition!
>
> *Otis.*

SHOP TALK

THE average man probably knows less about Siberia than any other section of the globe. If he were asked, I suspect he would admit that his impression of that forbidding country is one of snow, frozen steppes, Russian exiles in chains, more snow, huge Cossacks with knouts, and still more snow. *The Gray Wolves* in this issue is one of the very few stories of Siberia that I have ever seen, and it brings to our attention the fact, somehow surprising, that this unknown land is a place where people live and love and fight exactly as they do everywhere else. The author, **Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson**, was a major in command of a battalion of Yankee infantry in Siberia during the war. . . . I cannot remember reading anything about that corner of the world called "Achin" before either. (It's pronounced "Ah-cheen," by the way.) Judging from **Murray Leinster**'s story of that setting, *Gun Cargo,* I suspect it must have been, and perhaps still is, a mighty exciting place. Leinster, if we can persuade him, will give us more tales of Malaya in issues to come . . . The August **Everybody**'s wanders over several continents and a couple of oceans, in a group of exceedingly good yarns. **J. E. Grinstead**'s *Cities of Refuge* is a corking Western, a story of old Fort Smith days. **Frank H. Shaw** gives us another tale of Atlantic shipping. **Edgar Young** writes of Nicaragua, when General Lee Christmas gathered his "foreign legion" and stormed all over Central America, making and breaking governments and starting the glorious tradition of the Typical Tropical Tramp . . . Seven short stories and two serials complete what is a pretty comprehensive travelogue—and (which is even more important) a bookful of excellent fiction.

NOT WITHOUT ENVY

HERE is a cheerful and happy letter. I am inclined to suspect its author of malice. It's all very well for him to say what a swell place the world is and how glorious the open road. But in this most upsetting spring weather (for spring comes even to the twelfth floor of a city office building) he has no right to be so all-fired gloating about it!

Lord knows when was the last time I lay under a tree that rustled in the wind, with a good story to read and not a worry in the world. . . .

Well, here's the letter:

> This winter I found a copy of **Everybody**'s in a jungle outside a small Southern town. It was the first issue of the magazine to come my way in a long time. I've been reading every issue since, and actually buying them, too, instead of picking up my reading matter where I could find it. So you see I like it.
>
> A man does quite a lot of reading when he has a taste for it and plenty of time on his hands. Some of the fellows you meet on the road are pretty well educated, even though they talk like any roughneck. On rainy days or in cold weather they will head for the nearest public library and stay there reading until they get hungry or the place closes for the night. One of the best educated men I ever knew was a man I met in Denver who was a linotype operator. Like a lot of us he worked part of the time and hit the road when

he felt like it. He carried around with him pocket editions of classics which he picked up in second hand stores, and he would give them away when he was through. He gave me *Henry Esmond* by Thackeray, and I still have it. There's a real book!

And speaking of libraries, I started to read *The Three Musketeers* in a branch library on East 79th Street in New York, and continued it in libraries all across the country until I finished it finally in Portland, Oregon.

I guess I'm not a blown in the grass stiff. I don't work at it steadily. A fellow has to be pretty hardboiled to do that. I like to drift around and see places, but I never could see this business of being picked up as a vag and shoved in jail for a while. You can get a bed for two bits in flop joints all over the country, and Lord knows a man can earn a quarter without breaking his neck! And it isn't hard to eat steady, when you go at it right. And who wants to ride the blinds or the rods when you can get a lift on a highway and travel comfortable and in style?

I'm young enough yet and some day I guess I'll settle down, but the world is a swell place and I like it. When you've got a couple of dollars in your pocket, and you've had a good meal, and you're on the way to the next town, and the sun is shining and spring is rarin' to go all around you —boy, that's where I belong!

Just you keep on turning out a good magazine, and I'll buy it, and then you can think of me some place where there's trees blowing in the wind and shady grass to lie on and the good old earth smelling warm and fresh and maybe water rippling somewhere, and that's where I'll be reading your magazine. I'll thank you for some good stories then, but I don't think I'd swap jobs with you for a million bucks.

Good luck!

Hal Stevens,
Somewhere en route.

BATTLE, MURDER AND SUDDEN DEATH

THE percentage of readers who write to the editor of any magazine is comparatively small. That, of course, is in a way fortunate. I could imagine nothing more appalling than to find, some fair morning, that every reader of this magazine had written me a letter. Just conceive what that would mean! Letters in tens of thousands arriving minute by minute, as fast as the mailman could carry them in. Letters swamping the desks, burying them, crowding the editorial staff out the very doors. We would have to suspend a couple of issues while we read that one day's mail. And as for answering it . . . !

That is a contingency so remote, however, that it causes none of us to lie awake nights. I have never seen a time when there were too many letters. Each one that comes in, whether it be in complaint or praise, is welcomed and read with pleasure. And answered, too.

Of the editorial mail, only a minor fraction is that from disgruntled readers—which is as it should be. Yet criticism is earnestly desired, and its arrival is hailed with joy even when it hurts. Criticism which is really criticism, of course, and not merely calling names. If nothing else, it makes the congratulatory letters so much the nicer by contrast.

All of which leads up to a letter so exceptional as to be a curiosity. It follows in part:

> The personality of an editor is stamped on his magazine. The editor is also in position to judge his audience.
>
> Quite evidently, your audience consists of readers such as I was fifty years ago, in the days of the dime novel.
>
> In those days, the stories of impossible adventure always gave me the thrill with which your stories are supposed to abound.
>
> But that was fifty years ago. Nowadays, a two-page, detailed account of a fight between the hero and the villain merely fills me with ennui; and a promise of "stories of action" evokes a yawn.
>
> I want to read an occasional *restful* story, if you know what I mean. And your May issue hasn't a single one.
>
> Me? I have the alternative of keeping my quarter in my pocket. But I hate, like hell, to put a crimp in your circulation.
>
> *Albert Kraetzer.*

There is little that can be said in answer to that. I'm afraid I would be bored to death by a magazine full of "restful" stories, whatever they may be. Dumas, Stevenson, even the Old Testament itself are full of detailed accounts of fights between heroes and villains. The most interesting events about us are fights of one sort or another. It isn't so long since one of the most gallant fights ever made thrilled the whole world, when two Germans and an Irishman, in a fragile plane tackled the terrible North Atlantic and licked it to a frazzle.

So EVERYBODY'S shall remain dedicated to the idea that there never was a good story yet that didn't have a fight in it somewhere.

WILLIAM CORCORAN.

THE NEWS OF NEXT MONTH

Cities of Refuge

A Story of Old Texas

By J. E. GRINSTEAD

Another long novelette by this excellent author, the story of a stirring time when the Law invaded a land of forgotten men.

* * *

Lives of Men

A Novelette of the Sea

By FRANK H. SHAW

The story of a young skipper's first command, a gallant ship that was fated to die.

* * *

Emulation

A Tale of Nicaragua

By EDGAR YOUNG

A stark and intensely moving narrative of two soldiers of fortune who destroyed a navy.

* * *

And seven short stories of unusual merit, among them CAPTAIN DINGLE'S "Futility", a strange yarn of high-powered piracy; HUGH PENDEXTER'S "High Water", a tale of feud and flood time in the Old West; BASSET MORGAN'S delightful story of the South Seas, "The Thief of Tinian Time". In addition, THOMSON BURTIS' serial carries on, and DON CAMERON SHAFER'S Western novel comes to a thrilling conclusion.